How this East Bay housing developer is protecting construction sites against arson

Developer Panoramic Interests strung a huge banner across a 6-story apartment construction site in Berkeley proclaiming: "Fire Safety & Security First" with a list of the building's security features and a phone number to call if anyone sees anything suspicious.

After a spate of fires during the past two years, East Bay housing developers are increasingly worried about how to protect their buildings from arsonists. On Wednesday, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives ruled that an arsonist set a huge fire at an apartment construction site in Concord in late April.

"(Arson) is such an incredible concern," said Michael Thomas, Panoramic Interests' director of business development. "We're doing what we can to avoid a fire even though it's costing us an extra $250,000. It's worth it."

PATRICK KENNEDY

Developer Panoramic Interests hung a banner on a construction site in Berkeley to ward off potential intruders. The banner reads: "Fire Safety & Security First 24/7 security guard & video recording, Motion detectors, smoke detectors, fire alarms: EVERY FLOOR, M-Fire suppressive coating on all wood."

Panoramic Interests beefed up its security measures at a 70-unit development at 2539 Telegraph Ave. that is slated to wrap up in May 2019. West Builders is working on the wood-frame structure, which tends to the be most susceptible to fires.

The developer added 10-foot double security walls with barbed wire, round-the-clock surveillance and onsite security guards, motion detectors and fire alarms on each floor, and sprayed fire retardant on the wood materials.

The Concord fire was the fourth incident of fire destroying an under-construction housing development in the East Bay since 2016.

One project, Holliday Development's the Intersection at 3800 San Pablo Ave., burned down twice. The first time in July of 2016 and again in May of 2017.

The developer plans to finish the project by fall of next year using modules built at its Factory OS in Vallejo and then assembled onsite.

"It will be built faster and more efficiently" than site-built, said Rick Holliday, the firm's founder. "But most importantly, it won't pose any arson risk because the units will be delivered fully finished with all sprinklers

in."

Some developers have looked at using less flammable materials such as concrete or steel instead of wood, but wood is far more economical and the go-to material for mid-rise buildings that make up most of the new housing developments in the Bay Area.

That leaves developers to look at other ways to beef up security.

The new reality is that construction fires are becoming common on apartment development sites across the country and they are most often intentionally set, said Mike Pilla, president and CEO of Technical Risk Underwriters, an insurance company that covers about 1,500 residential developments.

When advising clients, his company recommends electronic surveillance such as cameras and "voice down" technology that will tell an intruder to leave. The key is that the system covers the entire perimeter of a site.

The cost of those systems may give some developers sticker shock, he said, but they are often more effective than the cost of security guards for months or years.

"Be aware what you are paying for," Pilla said.

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