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Miami officials become shutterbugs to snap buildings safe

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

An innovative approach to shuttering aims to safeguard vacant buildings at lower cost while simultaneously reducing blight.

Chicago-based Vacant Property Specialists rents and installs shutters of 14-gauge reinforced steel that clamp onto windows and doors. Unlike plywood, the traditional covering used on vacant buildings, they are perforated to allow air and light to pass and can be equipped with wireless alarms and water sensors.

There are no "pry points" that would allow intruders to insert tools behind the covering in an effort to remove it.

As a demonstration arranged with the assistance of Miami's Community Redevelopment Agency, the company installed the shutters at no cost at the former Miami Skills Center, 50 NW 14th St. The redevelopment agency recently purchased the building from Miami-Dade Public Schools and plans to develop a filming facility there.

"We'll work with the city as long as they need us," said John O'Leary, the company's CEO. It took less than a day to clamp the shutters on, he said, and no damage was done to the building during installation.

Though plywood would ap-

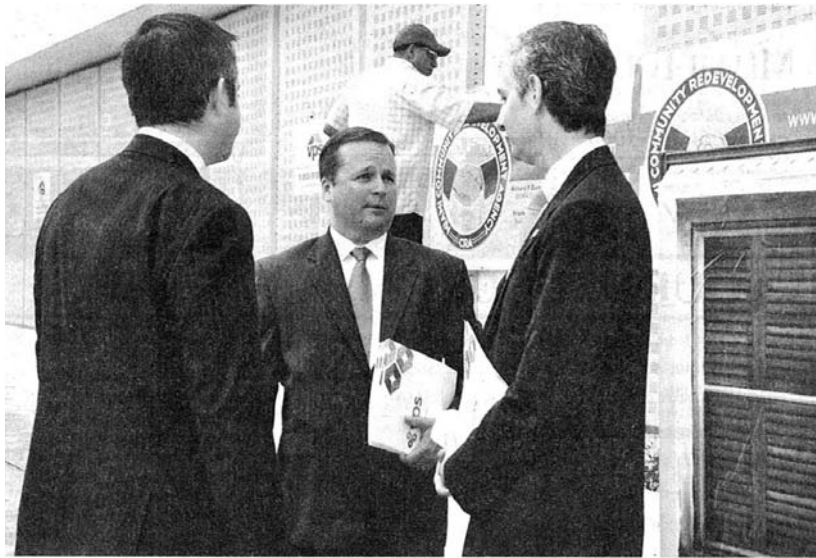


Photo by Maxine Usdan

Vacant Property Specialists Director of Public Affairs Christopher Kozicki, center, talks of benefits of the panels with Carlos J. Gimenez, Becker & Poliakoff attorney, left, and Commissioner Marc Sarnoff.

pear to be less expensive initially, the steel shutter product doesn't need to be replaced, is stronger and more versatile, reduces the possibility of mold and mildew, and is more visually appealing, he said. Because they are rented rather than sold, the shutters can be re-used.

While the skills center build-

ing got industrial-looking shutters in a grey-beige, more home-like designs are available for residential buildings. Metal, Mr. O'Leary said, is also better-suited to Miami's humid climate than wood.

"Windows covered in plywood contribute to the perception of blight within a community," said

Pieter Bockweg, Community Redevelopment Agency executive director, "and can be an indication of criminal activity."

Cost to equip a building varies with the number of windows, but a six-month window shutter rental from the company costs about \$105, according to its materials. The cost to put plywood

on the same window would be \$130, assuming the plywood is replaced every six months, the materials said. The cost to repair building damage after a break-in ranges from \$6,000 to \$12,000, Mr. O'Leary said.

The company's local installations include the Filling Station Lofts, a condominium project at 1650 NE Miami Court that went into foreclosure in 2009. Once vacant, the building became home to squatters who destroyed its electrical, plumbing, air-conditioning and ventilation systems, according to the company, but once the metal shutters were in place, break-ins

stopped and neighborhood crime decreased dramatically.

The company hopes the demonstration and attendant publicity will kick-start its effort to expand in the South Florida market.

"Education is the missing link," Mr. O'Leary said. "We need to make people aware of what we can do for them."

Details:
www.vpspecialists.com.



John O'Leary