

Salt Lake mall's owners report 'dramatic' crime drop, urge Utahns to come back

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SALT LAKE CITY — The owners of The Gateway — once a bustling shopping center before it saw its downfall during the economic downturn — want Utahns to know the area once overrun by crime and homelessness is beginning a new chapter.

Arizona-based Vestar, which has pumped over \$100 million to revitalize The Gateway, held a news conference on Tuesday as part of its ongoing efforts to draw Utahns back to the once-struggling mall — highlighting two reports that indicate crime has dropped "dramatically" over the last two years since Operation Rio Grande.

"It's very good news, to have crime drop by 79 percent," Jacklyn Briggs, Vestar marketing director, told the Deseret News in an interview Tuesday. "It makes the investment worth it, which we knew it was. But it's results, and that's what we were aiming for."

The report Briggs referred to was written by Trident Security, a firm hired by Vestar for private security. The report details crimes reported in the Gateway area from 2015 to 2018, showing an overall decrease of felony, theft and drug-related crimes.

"Serious felony crimes are significantly reduced from last year and have been dropping every year since 2015," the report states. "The biggest drop was from 2017 to 2018, showing an 80 percent reduction."

Behavior crimes — the most common incidents at Gateway, including loitering, disturbances, mall rule violation, panhandling, public intoxication, sleeping in common areas and trespassing — have decreased 79 percent since 2015, the report states.

Drug-related crimes have also dipped, 92 percent from 2015 and 63 percent from 2017, according to the report. Property crimes including graffiti and shoplifting have also decreased, down by 77 percent in 2015, the report says.

Vestar officials also cited an internal Utah Department of Workforce Services audit of the Road Home's downtown shelter from November of last year to January, which found safety, security and cleanliness at the Downtown Shelter have appeared to improve, but still needs progress, according to the audit report.

28 individuals currently in the downtown shelter who have stayed at the shelter over the past eight months and asked them if safety conditions have improved or deteriorated," auditors wrote in the report. "Twenty-six said conditions have improved, while two individuals indicated no improvement in conditions."

Additionally, auditors noted that during a "guest feedback meeting" held in the men's and women's shelter areas, residents "generally" reported that "safety and sanitary conditions

within the downtown shelter, including drug use, have improved over the last eight months. However, theft was still considered a significant problem."

The following summer after Vestar bought Gateway, state leaders, including former House Speaker Greg Hughes, ramped up the state's interest in cleaning up the infamous Rio Grande neighborhood surrounding the downtown homeless shelter, becoming increasingly known for drugs, crime and public health concerns.

Street camping, drug paraphernalia and even human waste on the sidewalks became a daily concern for businesses and residents.

"I personally had the police department on speed dial," said Peggy Hostetter, a longtime resident at Gateway. "Our neighborhood became completely littered with trash, human residue and hypodermic needles."

But after Operation Rio Grande — the multiagency effort to root out crime and help connect people experiencing homelessness with services — Hostetter said the change has been dramatic. That, coupled with Vestar's investment, Gateway got a chance at new life, she said. "Now I love walking through the Gateway," she said.

But the center still has a ways to go. Empty storefronts continue to line its walkways. While certain areas draw visitors, others remain vacant, especially during weekdays.

Briggs acknowledged some people still view the former mall as a ghost town but said the revitalization is a work-in-progress.

"It's definitely a process," she said. "Part of that process was making sure it was a safe and secure place."

Vestar has invested millions in "beautifying" the property and "making it a place that's not only safe, but fun," Briggs said, noting that more than 180 community events are planned on the Gateway's calendar.

Vestar is also in the process of transforming the shopping center into a "sports lifestyle district," Briggs said. Some new businesses have filled once empty storefronts, and more are coming soon, she said. Plus, the luxury hotel now in the planning process is expected to bring more visitors.

"It's all coming together but it is a process, and we're on our way," Briggs said.

Some have attributed Gateway's downfall to the success of City Creek Mall, only three blocks away. But Briggs said Gateway isn't just a mall anymore, but rather a "live, work, play" entertainment district.

"I think we can live together with City Creek," she said. "With Gateway being an entertainment sports district, they both bring something to the community that is needed."