

Published December 18th, 2013

## Upsurge of Commercial Theft in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Bill Snider checks a bill in the light. Photo Sophie Braccini

Bonita Vigil, who manages Safeway in Moraga, is no slouch when people try to steal from her store. Although Moraga is a quiet little town, she's recently had to deal with some unpleasant incidents. With the help of local police, the criminals were caught. At nearby Moraga Hardware and Lumber, Bill Snider also loses money to shoplifters and thieves; he is not afraid to confront them and has what is needed to prevent crime.

"One day or another you get caught," says Vigil. "It's not worth stealing a few hundred dollars."

"Recently people came at night and stole a whole cash register," Vigil recounts. "When the night crew came to ring a customer, they saw that it had been tampered with and emptied. The thieves were seen on tape and were caught soon after; after robbing another store in El Cerrito." Vigil would not disclose how much her store loses to theft. Snider willingly shared a loss figure of \$30,000 for the year.

"Shoplifting is like drug addiction and alcoholism, it knows no boundaries," says Snider from experience catching people stealing in his store. "There are people who have lived here a long time, drive \$100,000 cars, who I've seen stealing." Snider confronts them and tells them to pay back

what they've stolen over the years or never come back. And sometimes, he makes a citizen's arrest, detains the thief and calls the police. "I've owned this store for 13 years and I know who to watch," he said. "I've detained people twice this year." When that happens, Snider makes it very visible so word gets around that Moraga Hardware is not soft on crime.

A few weeks ago Vigil and her employees spotted the strange behavior of a woman who filled a cart with food, then left the store, followed by another woman who came by to retrieve the cart and take it briskly away. "We do not run after people who do that," says Vigil, "we call the police with the information about the car and the direction it's heading."

Moraga police sergeant Brian South took charge of the case and immediately contacted the Orinda police, since the silver Chevrolet Astro van had been seen moving toward Orinda. The three female accomplices were caught in front of Beverages and More and subsequently arrested for stealing \$1,000 worth of goods from Safeway and for possession of rock cocaine that was found in the car.

"We also made an arrest at Home Goods of a lady who stole objects there and in other Bay Area stores," said South, "and recently we arrested another female who tried to pass a fake \$50 bill at Safeway." Vigil says that the cashier looked at the bill through the light and noticed that the bright yellow water mark that should be visible next to the picture was not there. Police were called and arrived in time to arrest the woman.

"Trying to pass counterfeit money is a very serious crime," says South, "and we have to get the Secret Service involved."

At Moraga Hardware, Snider has become an expert in detecting counterfeit money; he even bought the same type of infrared machine that is used by a local bank. "People use old \$5 bills that they wash, then they print the \$100 marking on it," says Snider. "So if someone uses a currency-check pen that detects fake money, it will show up as being fine. But if you hold it to the light, you won't see the watermark embedded into the paper showing a portrait of Ben Franklin that is identical to the one printed on the face of the bill, instead you'll see the figure '5.'"

Lafayette police chief Eric Christensen sent out an alert to business owners Dec. 10 relating a similar story - someone in Lafayette had just passed a fake \$100 bill that was forged from a \$5 bill.

Snider says that when people want to pass counterfeit currency, they first go to stores with a real \$100 bill to check the local procedure. "When they see that we use the infrared machine, they never come back!" beams Snider.

Lafayette police chief Eric Christensen offers this list of the security features of U.S. currency.

The watermark: On the right side of the bill, the same president that is depicted upon the face of the bill should be on the watermark.

Mylar thread: Within the left side of the bill, there is a Mylar thread which should show the same denomination as that shown on the bill.

Color-shifting ink: On the number on the lower left hand corner, the value of the currency should change color as you move the bill from a green/brown to black.

Micro-printing: On larger denomination bills, there is micro-printing inside the numeric value in the lower left corner. The typing within the number should read USA and the value of the bill repeated over and over again; for example, USA20 USA20 USA20.

The feel and sound of the bill: Probably the best security feature is the texture of the bill; the currency should make a low, thudding sound when pulled upon.

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA