

Security not a top priority for office-seeking tenants - Concerns in Baltimore

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Security concerns are usually well down the list of considerations for tenants searching for office space, according to brokers and property owners in that commercial real estate sector.



When searching for office space, companies instead are generally more focused on practical matters like rent, parking and whether amenities and location will attract and retain talent.

“What I get asked for is what I call ‘check the box amenities,’” said Terri Harrington, senior vice president at MacKenzie Commercial Real Estate Services LLC, referring to items such as gyms and parking.

After high-profile incidents, such as the deadly rampage in the Capital Gazette newspaper’s building last month in Annapolis, questions about security temporarily become more frequent, brokers said, but they still are not a focus in searching for office space.

“It does come up, but I can tell you it doesn’t come up a lot,” Antony Gross, a senior vice president at JLL, said.

Security measures in buildings, brokers said, have become more stringent over the years. The most obvious change is building managers, especially in urban settings, have security on site 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Previously, security would leave about 7 p.m. on weekdays.

There’s also been a host of measures adopted and technologies deployed aimed primarily at restricting access to elevators from the lobby. An access card or key fob typically is needed to send an elevator to a selected floor.

Harrington said one of her clients, which she declined to identify because the transaction was too recent, signed a lease in downtown Baltimore and is gaining parking attached to the building. At the client’s current location, employees have to walk several blocks to park, but the change was viewed more as an amenity than a security upgrade.

“It was a benefit that was kind of a value-add,” she said.

Safety concerns are the most prevalent when dealing with government agencies. That's because requests for proposals include requirements such as recent active shooter planning. Depending on the function of an agency, there can be even more detail requirements regarding access to a building.

Concerns in Baltimore

Interest in security is a more prominent topic when companies are seeking out properties in Baltimore. Most of those worries aren't so much about safety in the building but protecting employees, customers, and guests coming and going.

"It never comes up in the suburban office parks," Gross said.

Most businesses in Baltimore are already familiar with the ups and downs that come with being in an urban area. Employees usually feel safe, outside incidents like the April 2015 riots, but know not to be lulled into a false sense of security.

Property owners, such as Morning Calm Management, which took control of 500 E. Pratt St. in downtown Baltimore in February, said investigating the safety of an area before investing in an asset is typical for any firm buying an asset. Executives said the property's location in Baltimore didn't cause the firm to be any more vigilant.

Instead, their focus was primarily on what any investor considers before buying into a building: can they lease space and get the projected return on the investment.

"It's a quality market with a lot of quality tenants," said Bryan Zenchyk, managing director at Morning Calm Management.

High-tech measures

The company has invested in upgrading security at the building that already had manned security 24/7. Morning Calm Management installed state-of-the-art security measures that allow tenants to access the building via a smartphone app. After summoning an elevator, the security system even sends a photo to a security guard who verifies the person getting on the elevator matches a provided identification photo.

They've also installed monitors at the loading dock entrance, at the entrance from the garage to the building and at the top of the monumental staircase from the lobby to the second floor that lets someone see themselves on the monitor, so they know they are being recorded.

When someone who may be up to no good sees they're being filmed, it serves as a deterrent, said Douglas Brewer, managing director at Morning Calm Management. Vendors making deliveries to the building must also exchange their driver's license to get a pass that allows access to the freight elevator.

Investing in these security measures isn't satisfying tenant demand, or a response to danger in the area, Brewer said – it's an attempt by his company to stay ahead of the curve.

"We're always looking to be cutting edge," Brewer said.

Tenants are more safety conscious than they were a few years ago, but security is tighter everywhere, noted Zenchyk, who is a graduate of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, which was the site of a mass shooting earlier this year.

"Unfortunately, it's the world we're living in," he said.

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