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Three Arrested in String of Gas Station Robberies

Trio charged in four robberies; more charges expected

By Kevin Cokely | Friday, Jun 8, 2012 | Updated 10:01 PM CDT



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A Crime Stoppers tip after an NBC 5 story led police to

three men suspected in a string of gas station robberies in Grand Prairie, Euless, Arlington and Bedford.

Luis Lopez, 29, arrested at a Arlington home June 5, Euless police said.

"Investigators interviewed him," Capt. Gary Landers said. "He subsequently confessed. Based on the information he gave us, we developed the other two suspects."

Police arrested 22-year-old Fabian Fernandez in Bedford on Thursday and 23-year-old Amador Febles-Vazquez in Fort Worth on the following day.

"From May 13th at 6 a.m. to May 20th at 2:45 a.m., they hit nine places," Landers said. "They hit several places in one night."

Surveillance cameras show them taking cash from the register, ordering clerks at the QuikTrips and RaceTracs to the floor and threatening to shoot them if they move.

"The concern was it might escalate, because they were saying they had a weapon," Landers said. "They never displayed a weapon, but they said that they had a weapon and if they didn't comply with them, they would use it."

The three are all being held in the Euless City Jail. They're charged with four robberies in that city, and police in the others are expected to add more charges.

"We are relieved to have them off the street," Landers said. "We're relieved to have them in custody, and hopefully, hopefully, this doesn't happen again."

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Two robbers suspected in 9 North Texas convenience store holdups

May. 22, 2012

Two robbers could be responsible for as many as nine holdups at area gasoline stations, with the same bandits hitting Euless at least four times this month, police said Tuesday.

Euless police have released photographs of the suspects from store surveillance cameras in hopes that someone recognizes the robbers.

The bandits have threatened to shoot employees, but no one has brandished a weapon.

In each of the Euless holdups, the robbers entered the businesses with their faces covered with a T-shirt, police said. They walked behind the counters and demanded cash.

After fleeing the stores, the men got into a two-tone blue or green over tan minivan, police said.

The men are believed to be in their 20s with thin builds.

The robbed businesses are the QuikTrip in Grand Prairie on May 12; QuikTrips in Bedford and on Westpark Way in Euless on May 13; QuikTrip on South Industrial Boulevard and RaceTrac on West Euless Boulevard, both in Euless, and a QuikTrip and RaceTrac in Arlington on May 14.

Robbers hit the RaceTrac on West Euless Boulevard in Euless again Saturday and a QuikTrip in Grand Prairie on Sunday.

Anyone with information about any of the robberies should call their local police department or Crime Stoppers at 817-469-8477.

Domingo Ramirez Jr.,

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Mid-cities work to catch brazen thieves



EULESS, Texas -

Four police departments are working together to get a brazen group of thieves off the streets. The men have robbed at least seven convenience stores in the mid-cities area.

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Police said a group of three Hispanic men, at least one with a thick Spanish accent, has robbed busy convenience stores in Euless, Bedford, Arlington and Grand Prairie.

In almost every case two of the men enter the store with t-shirts covering their faces. One man goes directly behind the counter and threatens the clerk while demanding money. The second man is known to grab packs of cigarettes.

The men have claimed to have a gun.

"No weapon has actually been displayed but our fear is as this progresses that they keep getting braver and braver and braver. There may be a weapon displayed at some point and time," said Capt. Gary Landers with the Euless Police Department.

Euless is the city that has seen the highest number of incidents. Some have taken place when the stores are busy with customers.

"It's extremely surprising. They go in when there's lots of people. Pretty brazen individuals to be going in there," Landers said.

Police are hoping someone will recognize the suspects in surveillance images. In one instance one of the men can be seen without his face covered

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Bedford joins other area cities in denying Atmos Energy rate increase

Bedford is the latest city to deny Atmos Energy a proposed 13.6 percent rate increase.

Following the recommendation of the Atmos Cities Steering Committee, which comprises representatives from more than 150 cities served by Atmos Mid-Tex, the Bedford City Council voted 7-0 Tuesday night to reject the request.

Fort Worth, Arlington, Eules and Hurst have also voted down the proposed increase.

"They were unable to reach an agreement with Atmos, and the next step in the process is to deny the rate increase one city at a time," said Chris Barker, assistant city manager in Eules.

"Although we formed the group to make recommendations, each city makes its own decisions."

More than 200 of the 441 cities that Atmos Energy serves in Texas have denied the request filed Jan. 31 to increase the rate it charges for delivery of natural gas, Atmos spokeswoman Jennifer Ryan said.

"The Mid-Tex division filed a rate case for a systemwide increase of about \$49.1 million, which equates to about \$2.71 per [residential] customer per month," Ryan said. "The reasoning is that we're making a considerable investment in our infrastructure to maintain a safe and reliable system. This rate case is how we recover our investment."

David Park, Atmos vice president for rates and regulatory affairs, told the Star-Telegram in February that the utility had made about \$134 million in capital improvements in the previous 14 months and \$500 million since 2007.

The Fort Worth City Council denied the rate request May 15 after Utility Administrator Bridgette Garrett reported that the steering committee recommended a number of changes to Atmos' figures.

She said, for instance, that the company's return on equity rates (the amount shareholders are entitled to) should be reduced from 10.9 percent to 9.5 percent, that a proposal for an energy

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efficiency plan funded only by ratepayers should be removed, and that requested operation and maintenance expense levels should be lowered.

If the utility and the cities can't reach a compromise, Atmos will appeal each case individually to the Texas Railroad Commission, Ryan said.

Atmos Mid-Tex has 30 days after a city denies the rate increase to file an appeal, said Railroad Commission spokeswoman Ramona Nye.

"We have not received an appeal yet," Nye said.

Once an appeal is filed, the commission will enter a final order establishing rates within 185 days, Nye said. Final action will take place at a public conference.

Should the rate increase be granted, Atmos customers would pay more for transporting gas, but would see bills lower than two years ago because of a significant decrease in the market price of gas, Ryan said.

She said that Atmos charged \$5.35 per 1,000 cubic feet of gas in May 2010. A year later, the charge was \$5.91. This month, it's about \$3.55.

A residential customer using 4,400 cubic feet, which Ryan said is the average monthly usage, would pay \$36.59. If the rate increase is approved, that bill would be \$39.30.

This report includes material from the Star-Telegram archives.

Terry Evans, 817-390-7620

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Can they find their way to Austin?

Posted Saturday, Jun. 02, 2012

The Texas Capitol runs on seniority and smarts.

But next year, Tarrant County will send rookies.

At least six newcomers will represent local voters in the Texas House thanks to new election maps and losses by two incumbents.

For example, Bedford and Euless will probably be represented by a 28-year-old who has gone to the Capitol twice in his life, including once for the public tour.

"I've been watching quite a bit of video to see what a state representative actually does," said Jonathan Stickland, the Republican nominee for the District 92 seat vacated by Todd Smith.

Stickland campaigned for presidential candidate Ron Paul and others in past elections, but he said that until this year, he had never imagined himself "writing bills and amendments and all that stuff."

Stickland is the youngest on a Republican ticket that also includes Matt Krause, 31, of Fort Worth and Giovanni Capriglione, 39, of Southlake. The Democratic ticket includes several 30ish candidates, including ex-lawmaker Chris Turner, 39, of Grand Prairie.

(Stickland also said he did not know until last week that Texas House Speaker Joe Straus is Jewish. I quoted him in March telling a Tea Party meeting that he would oppose Straus "because as a Christian, I believe we must call evil evil." He said that he was answering an earlier question about abortion, not talking about Straus, and that he will renounce any ally who insults Straus' faith.)

Both Stickland and Krause, a religious conservative making his second House bid in a district spanning north Arlington and east and north Fort Worth, said their mentor in the Tarrant County delegation will be four-term Arlington Republican Bill Zedler, 68, if Zedler defeats Libertarian Max Koch.

"There's some stuff you can only learn by having been there, and we have good people to look up to," Krause said.

On the Democratic side, Turner has the inside track to return to the Legislature from Arlington. He served one House term two years ago when he lived in Burleson.

"Clearly, Tarrant County is losing a lot of seniority this cycle," he said.

"But there's been so much turnover in the Legislature the last two years, maybe it won't be a disadvantage. What's important is for us to work together as a county delegation on the issues that cross party lines, like university funding."

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We talked about the inherent problem with turnover in Austin: The lobbyists and bureaucrats never leave.

"That's spot-on," Turner said. "The people who are there year-round wield a lot of influence. We're the ones learning."

Call it a 140-day tour of the Capitol.

Bud Kennedy's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

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More than 2 dozen pools in Tarrant County shut down

Posted Sunday, Jun. 03, 2012

Jump in a swimming pool with the alkaline level too high and disinfectants may not kill the bacteria swimming along with you.

Poorly maintained pools can also have problems with wastewater disposal, with the devices that prevent swimmers from getting sucked under water and trapped, or with electrical equipment.

Inspectors have found such problems and more at pools in Tarrant County this spring and have ordered the immediate shutdown of more than two dozen because of health hazards.

As families look for somewhere to cool off this summer, they may want to know how safe it is to take a dip at public pools and the pools at health clubs, apartment complexes and motels.

Inspectors visit them all. Some might get monthly inspections, but others are inspected only once a year -- and it may be August before it's their turn.

And only in Fort Worth can the public get quick access to the inspection reports. The city posts online health inspection reports for the roughly 900 pools and spas it is responsible for citywide.

Most Tarrant County cities and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport contract with the county for the inspections, but the county doesn't publish the inspection reports on its website.

To find out about pool closures or get reports on any of the 568 pools the county inspects, an open-records request is required, officials said.

That's because there is no standardized rating system for swimming pools as there is for food inspections, making it more difficult to quantify ratings, said David Jefferson, environmental manager for Tarrant County Public Health.

He also said Tarrant County Public Health doesn't charge cities enough or have enough staff to put the data online.

"We would love to do those things, but we have limits just like everybody else," Jefferson said.

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Arlington and Euless also require open-records requests. North Richland Hills doesn't, but you must ask for the information in person at 7200C Dick Fisher Drive S.

Officials in both Euless and North Richland Hills say no one has been clamoring to get the information.

"We have not had them on a website, because it's not a frequently requested item," Euless spokeswoman Betsy Deck said. Arlington would consider putting the information online if the public requested it, Gutierrez said.

While there may be little public demand for inspection reports, pools across Tarrant County have been closed this spring for various health and safety reasons.

Typical problems include inadequate chlorine or other problems with the pool's chemistry, or unlocked gates or other safety hazards.

In Fort Worth, officials say most pools are inspected once a year unless there are problems.

So far this year Fort Worth has done 81 routine inspections and made 23 closure orders. All the pools that were ordered closed, including four in May, have been reinspected and reopened, according to the city.

"Most of these operators want to rectify the problems right away," said Elmer DePaula, consumer health superintendent for code compliance. "Most of the apartment complexes have someone paying rent or a lease, and I would say there is drive to have that corrected."

In 2008, the federal Virginia Graeme Baker Safety Act required drain cover standards for public pools to prevent entrapment by suction from uncovered drains, and one of the pools the city ordered closed in May had some problems with maintenance of an anti-entrapment device. But DePaula said most public pools have addressed those issues.

Tarrant County inspectors shut down five pools this year, but only one, the Holiday Inn Express in Mansfield, has been re-inspected and allowed to reopen.

The others that remained closed as of Friday morning are the Buffalo Ridge Apartment in Burleson, the Oak Creek Apartments Phase 1 in Bedford, the Toscana Villas Apartments in Bedford, and the Econolodge in Azle, according to information obtained through an open-records request.

Entities that contract with Tarrant County for inspections include Azle, Hurst, Bedford, Keller, Benbrook, Lake Worth, Burleson, Mansfield, Blue Mound, Pantego, Colleyville, Richland Hills, Crowley, River Oaks, DFW Airport, Saginaw, Dalworthington Gardens, Sansom Park, Everman, Southlake, Forest Hill, Watauga, Grapevine, Westlake, Haltom City, Westworth Village, Haslet and White Settlement.

Arlington, which inspects 484 public or semipublic pools either annually or semiannually, hasn't ordered any closed this year, said Misty Gutierrez, field operations manager for the west code compliance division. But more than 100 pools have not been inspected yet, the city says. Some four dozen others didn't receive their annual operating permit because they didn't pass inspection.

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The most common violations are poor water quality, defective or missing safety equipment, inoperable filtering and sanitation equipment, defective pool barriers, defective electrical equipment, inaccurate depth markings and absence of a working emergency telephone.

Officials noted that pools are also inspected when a complaint is made.

In North Richland Hills, pools are inspected by two employees of the neighborhood services environmental health division, who also inspect restaurants, city spokeswoman Mary Peters said.

Each pool gets a preseason inspection, followed by monthly inspections during the May-through-September swim season. Pools either pass or fail; they aren't scored like restaurants.

Unless pools are inspected by code compliance officers who also inspect apartment complexes for safety and cleanliness.

Checking pools annually and when complaints are received, they note deficiencies and, if the number or type of infractions warrant, will close the pools.

On May 24, officials said, pools at two motels were closed -- Plaza Suites, 421 W. Airport Freeway, because of low chlorine levels, and Quality Inn, 1001 W. Airport Freeway, because of missing equipment.

The front pool at Shadow Creek Apartments, 311 S. Industrial Blvd., was closed May 31 because of lack of maintenance. A pool in the back was closed earlier, Deck said.

Staff writers Terry Evans and Patrick Walker contributed to this report.

Bill Hanna,

817-390-7698