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## The EZPass of Doormen

By Bonnie Kavoussi



A key fob-operated Virtual Doorman at m650 Flats in Jersey City..

From Ocala, Fla., and Unity, Maine, the fate of New York doormen may be decided. The two towns headquarter the remote command centers of the Virtual Doorman, a technology that, as the name suggests, acts as a building's doorman in everything but a warm body. Plus, it's cheaper: \$9,000 to \$17,000 for installation, maintenance extra, while a real, live doorman might run a building \$80,000 annually.

EZPass analogy, anyone?

About 110 apartment complexes in the New York metro area use Virtual Doorman, mostly in Manhattan, and the company that released its first virtual doorman in 2000 is now looking to expand nationwide.

There is a tradeoff, however, for the price: Orwellian-like vigilance.

“The theme that’s happened in the last couple of weeks is we have people that watch their dog walker,” said Colin Foster, the founder and marketing head of Virtual Doorman. “He was out for only 15 minutes—I’m paying him for half an hour!”

And workers from the Florida and Maine command centers can watch female tenants as they walk home alone from their parked cars. If anyone comes from behind, someone from Ocala can intone Eastwood-like, “Sir, you are instructed to leave the building. If you do not leave immediately, we will call the police,” or, “We have already called the police, and they are already on their way.”

But Mr. Foster argues that Virtual Doorman actually provides more privacy than real doormen—at least for residents—since real doormen aren’t intruding into their personal lives. Still, with a 24-hour video feed of each apartment complex, they may also be the new Big Brother.

And why Ocala and Unity, anyway, and not, say, Brooklyn or the Bronx? The bottom line. “Fifteen to seventeen dollars is a very good salary in Ocala, Florida,” Mr. Foster said.

Mr. Foster added he’s hoping that Virtual Doorman will become a publicly traded company in the next several years on the New York Stock Exchange. “There used to be elevator-men in every elevator up until the 1950s. Now it’s all automated,” said a spokeswoman for the company. “I think this is the next big thing.”

But while Virtual Doorman users said they really like the service, they don’t think it will replace real doormen for good. Danielle Christensen, who lives at 267 West 124th Street, said she doesn’t think real doormen will grow obsolete. “It’s something actually incomparable.”

One resident of a 285-unit rental that’s switching from live doormen to the virtual kind did not express much enthusiasm. Zipora P. Schlesinger said that there used to be someone “always at the door” at 88 Morningside Drive. “There used to be two [doormen], and now there’s one, and now—Columbia is saving money.”

But it's no secret that doorman apartments are facing tough times as both landlords and tenants look to cut costs. While the number of new leases for apartments in doorman buildings dropped 63.2 percent annually in the second quarter of 2009, according to Mille Samuel and Douglas Elliman, non-doorman apartments saw a less marked annual drop (47.7 percent) and actually a 58.2 percent quarterly jump in new leases in the second quarter.

Meanwhile, Virtual Doorman currently has a 100 percent renewal rate, according to Mr. Foster.