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Billionaire Donald Bren targeted in \$1.4-million ID theft

A man who looks nothing like the Orange County real estate magnate allegedly opened accounts in Bren's name and deposited a tax-refund check stolen from Bren, a criminal complaint says.

By Walter Hamilton, Los Angeles Times

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It would make for a bad separated-at-birth joke if the alleged thief hadn't stolen almost \$1.4 million in an identity-theft case targeting one of Southern California's wealthiest men.

A man who looks nothing like Orange County real estate magnate Donald Bren allegedly walked into the Cerritos branch of East West Bank, opened [accounts](#) in Bren's name and deposited a \$1.4-million federal tax-refund check stolen from Bren, according to a criminal complaint made public Wednesday.

The unknown man then drained more than \$1.1 million from the accounts over the next four weeks, according to the complaint by the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles.

Images captured by the bank's [surveillance camera](#) show the man to be balding, heavysset and considerably younger than the trim, dapper 78-year-old Bren.

With an estimated net worth of \$12 billion, Bren is ranked by Forbes magazine as the 16th-richest American and the 45th-richest in the world. Even so, his name didn't ring a bell at the bank.

"His name is well known in certain circles, [but] you can't know everyone in the world no matter how famous their names are," said Emily Wang, the bank's [marketing director](#).

The thief, who opened the account with a fake Social Security number and driver's license, didn't allude to Bren's job as chairman of Irvine Co., a giant land developer. Instead, he listed his occupation as "smoke shop," according to the complaint. Bren declined to comment.

The man opened the accounts Feb. 16 and transferred the money to accounts held by people at outside banks in ensuing weeks, according to the complaint. Investigators are trying to determine who controls those accounts, said Thom Mrozek, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles.

The scheme demonstrates the ease with which identity-theft scams are carried out, said Linda Foley, founder of the nonprofit Identity Theft Resource Center in San Diego.

"That's how they get away with it — they're so convincing in who they are that people don't think twice," Foley said.