

Neighborhood Meeting 8/19/04

Introduction: This is one of several meetings that will be devoted to safety in Takoma Park with particular focus on the OTRA neighborhood as affected by inter-jurisdictional problems and by the many pedestrians who cross the neighborhood to use public transportation system of the METRO rail. The purpose of this meeting was to describe the problem and to voice the concerns of the neighborhood. Future meetings will be devoted to the search of solutions.

1. **Is Community Oriented Policing functional?**

The COP program was not effective, when neighbors attempted to use it. Police officers assigned to Victor sector 2 did not respond to telephone calls about neighborhood problems, such as abundant cars. COP, which should increase police visibility and enhance the connection between police and the neighborhood, has failed to do so. A program that increases visibility, however, is needed; lack of visibility is a perceived problem.

Chief Cindy Creamer responded that the department is still in the early phase of COP deployment, which was slowed down by regional and national competition for good police officers. It is necessary to develop the “Takoma Park Advantage”, since bigger departments, such as Montgomery County Police Department has it easier to offer incentives that matter to police officers: special assignments and advancement.

3. **The border issues DC, Montgomery County, Takoma Park and PG County.**

Neighbors in recent crime events who were at the scene within minutes of the occurrence observed that criminals have an easy time to cross the border and avoid further prosecution. The local crime is defined as a cross border issue in many occurrences in this neighborhood.

Chief Cindy Creamer responded that cross-border criminal activity is certainly extremely important along the border of DC. It also involves PG County, & Montgomery County. Successful crime fighting requires developing inter-jurisdictional programs that combine the capabilities of all police departments involved and include also probation officers. Such a programs are long-term solutions requiring the development of a CSAFE initiative reaching across state lines.

2. **Why not use common sense solutions to some problems?**

One common sense solution would be Taxi stands at the exit of the Takoma METRO station. The establishment of Taxi stands has been raised as an issue with the District of Columbia. DC has to give permission for a taxi stand and a street sign. This issue has been stalled by political inertia. It should be reopened, perhaps with pressure through Takoma and Takoma Park residents. Another common sense solution tried in the past was “partners-on-patrol”.

This program created certain liability and staffing issues, which have to be resolved politically before such program can be re-considered.

4. **What about police visibility and contact with residents?**

The main concern expressed by the residents at this meeting was the lack of a visible police presence and a lack of connectiveness of the patrolling police officers with the residents. Suggestions made were such as: what about targeted deployment of a visible police presence at critical hours during the evening? What about driving with open windows, so there can be a visible contact? What about intermittent foot or bike patrol? A change in this visibility factor may greatly enhance the prestige of the police and the feeling of safety in the community. Residents also reported that there was a delayed contact with crime victims after a crime was committed, while an immediate contact was expected.

5. **Is the manpower strength of the police department adequate for the job?**

The manpower of the police department has been below the approved number of 41 officers. This meant that the patrols are consistently understaffed and, police officers are pulled from other duties, in order to maintain required levels of police patrol in the city of Takoma Park for 24 hrs/ 7 days a week. There are several reasons for the understaffing. One is the region-wide lack of applicants for police service. Another reason is the relative rigorous selection criteria established by the police department, which excludes willing, but less qualified candidates. A third reason is the local competition between jurisdictions. The City Council has permitted over-hiring in 2003, recognizing the problem caused by the manpower shortage.

Furthermore an independent evaluator has examined the staffing of the police department in a report requested by the Chief of Police. This evaluator has established that the police department may need 4 to five additional officers. The Public Safety Citizens Advisory Committee has supported this review and has presented it to the city council in 2003. The City Council has not acted on these recommendations. One factor may be competition between different cost items in the city budget as suggested by Sustainable Takoma.

6. **Police crime response and crime prevention.**

It was recognized and appreciated that the Takoma Park Police response to crimes is fast, better than surrounding jurisdictions. The attendees, however, felt that they want emphasis on crime prevention.

The Chief of Police stressed that such emphasis involves multiple components, which are: crime prevention by residents and proactive policing. The police department is willing to increase educational programs to citizens regarding safe behavior in the streets. This can be done in connections with review of environmental factors favoring unsafe conditions and increased local bike patrols and increased visibility.

There was confusion about, how to call the police by cell phones. Chief Creamer suggested that residents call the Takoma Park police number directly on their cell phones (301-270-1100), in fact, it is recommended to have this number pre-punched, so a call can be executed more efficiently.

7. **Neighborhood Safety Contacts and neighborhood patrols.**

The Neighborhood Safety Contacts (NSC) are one avenue for residents to interact with the police in Takoma Park and to work on the solutions of problems. The NSC has a dual function: to present the residents' concerns to the police and the relevant city departments and also communicate important information to the residents. The Safety Committee is looking for new volunteers. They will have a family picnic on September 25, from 11-3:00 pm at VFW Post 350 in Takoma.

8. **The search for long-term solutions.**

The group agreed that the crime problem requires both, short-term and long-term solutions. Review of environmental factors favoring crime may be a small step, but one that can be done immediately (The broken window effect). Increased efforts in targeted police presence, is certainly one action that would restore confidence in the police. Long-term solution perhaps are those that combine the resources of adjacent jurisdictions and the judicial system in a CSAFE program.

Reported with the use of notes by Barbara Matthews and Peter Bannwell by
Wolfgang J. Mergner

9. **Next meeting on 9/23/04 with participation of adjoining neighborhood associations in the parlor of the Presbyterian Church at 7:30 PM**

10. **In attendance:**

Residents: Steve Shapiro, Peter Bannwell, Ann Larson, Seth Grimes, Andy Kelemen, Susan Schreiber, Laura DiCursio, Sabrina Baron, Rita Marth, Paul Marth, Chantel Worzala, Maurice Belanger, Wolfgang J. Mergner, Bob Guldin, Susan Strasser, Ellen Taylor, Roland Halstead, Ann Ludlow, Betty Jones, Nancy Currier, Aggie Patti, David Kirk Dandoff, Jack Bradman, Tim Rahn, Kevin Mills, Keats Kirsch, Mark Sherman, Jeffrey Silverstone, Art Taylor.

City of Takoma Park: Kathy Porter, Mayor, Barbara Matthews, City Manager, Joy Austein-Lane, Council Member.

Takoma Park Police Department: Cindy Creamer, Chief of Police, Pfc Cynthia Conrad, Det A.M. John, TPPD, CID, Pfc Tina Smith, Sgt. Kurt Gilbert.

Takoma Park Gazette: Sean Sands.