

Alexandria's Crime Fight

Police, Residents' Effort Yields Significant Results

By Rick Allen
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Last year was just too much for Alexandria's Inner City residents—too much rowdyism, too much loitering, too many wine houses and too much aggravation for the neighborhood.

Although parts of the 30-block area bounded by First Street, Columbus Street, Cameron Street and the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad have a long history as collecting points for criminals, last summer's fencing operations, prostitution and public drinking sessions drove members of the Inner City Civic Association to lobby Alexandria's city government for increased police patrols.

The 5,200-member civic association, led by the Inner City Crime Watch Committee formed in December, teamed up with the police in an effort that has had a significant impact on crime, residents and city officials say.

"It's been a long time coming. We decided that we had to turn the crime around," crime watch member Mitchell Griffin said. Beginning in April, police sent out two-man foot patrols during evening and morning hours.

Because of the increased patrols, police have made more than 129 arrests on charges ranging from public drunkenness to drug possession. The Vice-Narcotics squad has also closed down seven wine houses, residences or cars where alcohol is sold illegally, sometimes to juveniles.

When the program began, some Inner City residents were afraid of tipping off police because they feared retaliation from drug dealers, often heroin addicts selling marijuana to finance their habit. Lt. Earl Walts, an 11-year police veteran who heads the operation in the Inner City, said that people now feel more comfortable about calling the police department.

"The amount of information, of intelligence, we've gotten has increased. We get calls from people who know where drugs are kept," Walts said.

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Police have targeted a 12-block area around Queen Street and N. Fayette Street, known as "The Corridor," for their patrols.

Transvestite and female prostitutes at the nearby intersection of King Street and N. Henry Street are also a major police concern. During the past weekend, police arrested 24 men in the area and charged them with soliciting for prostitution.

In addition to stepped up surveillance by police and citizens, the association also began a program called Court Watch in which citizens go to District Court to hear the disposition of the cases of those arrested in their neighborhood. Residents and city officials hope such monitoring will

lead to changes in city ordinances, such as the one on loitering, to "put more teeth" into them.

For example, in the last group of loitering arrests, Judge Robert T. Colby could not prosecute those arrested because they were not blocking an entrance or street. Some of those picked up for loitering misinterpreted the judge's remarks and have continued to loiter on the streets with impunity, police say.

"We're now dealing with people who don't want to move, unless they're arrested. The information we're gathering show that they are committing offenses. They think they're going to outwait us, and that is not going to happen. We'll continue to make arrests on violations in our presence," Walts said.

Besides controlling criminal action, residents

are also seeking to improve the appearance of their neighborhood. After Inner City residents talked with City Council members, the city removed 38 abandoned cars and 40 tons of trash from the target area. The code enforcement division of the Department of Public Safety is now looking into other possible code violations, especially in abandoned buildings.

Council member Carlyle C. Ring said the patrol operation would be kept up as long as it takes to get the message across that residents and neighbors will not put up with crime.

Ring credited the cooperation between neighbors and police with boosting morale in the police department and heightening police commitment to the neighborhood. "They feel they can now do something," he said.