

First Avenue Uptown College District Meeting

July 19, 2007

Coe College

2 p.m.

Present: Ted Albee, Marie Baehr, Scott Crosby, Cindy Davis, Craig Erickson, Sandi Fowler, Carey Hamilton, Rev. Bill Harnish, Brent Heinz, Scott Kallemeyn, Erin Lenninger, Richard Luther, Richard Marsceau, Kristina Mattison-Bohr, Bill Olinger, Kevin Platz, Rod Pritchard, Amanda Proffitt, Laura Rainey, Katie Roger, Lou Stark, Amber Svoboda, Willeta Waisath, John Wasta, Ross Weidener, and Betsy Westphalen.

Special Guests:

Captain Jeff Mellgren - Cedar Rapids Police Department Narcotics and Vice Unit

Jim Prosser – Cedar Rapids City Manager

Mike Klappholz – Cedar Rapids Chief of Police

Harold Denton – Linn County Attorney

Bernie Walther - Police Captain, City of Cedar Rapids

This newly formed business group invited the city manager, police chief and county attorney to the July meeting to address safety and security concerns and in hopes of finding positive solutions. All officials invited were in attendance. The steering committee created a Power Point presentation that broke the issues into separate categories. The categories and responses are as follows:

1. Real and perceived lack of safety and security

- *“Reputation” of the area*
- *Prohibiting business development: attracting less retail, 1st Ave. is a high traffic thoroughfare, yet many are afraid to stop and shop*

Mr. Denton commented on the recent increased police presence in the Mound View area. Capt. Walther named a number of initiatives currently in place. Project Safe Neighborhood is an anti-gang grant that allows for overtime and training and is aimed at removing firearms from the street. A Weed & Seed grant from the U.S. Dept. of Justice aims to create a strategy to prevent, control and reduce violent crime, drug abuse and gang activity in designated, high-crime neighborhoods across the country. He pointed out that there were only one or two days in June that did not have extra officers in the neighborhood. The Narcotics and Vice Unit also puts plainclothes officers out to identify jaywalking and parking violations on and around First Avenue. Mound View and Wellington Neighborhoods have noted the recently increased police attention at their monthly neighborhood meetings. The police department has set up specific traffic points in this area to catch offenders and in one three-hour block, caught numerous violators, many on narcotic charges. There are now 30 officers trained for bike patrols and the bulk of those officers patrol areas near downtown, including the Mound View neighborhood.

2. Some of those arrested back on the street very quickly

- *“Revolving Door”*
 - *Arrests made and back in the community in little time, Little to no deterrence in criminal activity*
- *What is being/can be done to remedy?*

Mr. Denton said that felony drug charges take awhile to move through the system and if the defendant has “significant ties to the community,” they will often be released back into the community until their trial date. The jails are also overcrowded. If offenders haven’t been to jail previously, there is a good chance they will not go to jail for their first offense. Mr. Denton also pointed out that the process of developing informants takes a substantial amount of time. The sentencing of offenders is also decided by the courts. There is talk of possibly creating a special drug court that would be dedicated to certain types of drug crimes.

3. Private money spent on security

- *Area businesses paying for more security to ensure safer environment*

- *Where does responsibility lie?*
- *What can we all do to help?*

Capt. Walther reported that the police do try to anticipate problem areas and problem times of day. They deliberately patrol convenience stores around 1:30 – 2 a.m. when bars close. This is a challenge for the businesses and the police department. The police department tries to work with businesses on this situation and may have to try some new strategies. Mr. Prosser added that other cities have used controversial approaches to combat the same type of problem. Some cities have required certain businesses to close during peak incident hours. He indicated the city of Cedar Rapids would be interested in feedback on that issue. He also cautioned that state laws may prohibit some of the strategies. Members of the First Avenue Uptown College District named a few businesses that seem to consistently attract customers with questionable behavior. Rod Pritchard pointed out that this newly formed business group does continue to invite all businesses along First Avenue to participate in the group, but that some have not been interested.

Kristina Mattison-Bohr stated that the neighborhood residents are very open to new and possibly controversial ideas. The populace is ready for a change. If situations do not improve, many families will be forced to move out of the area. Chief Klappholz stated that the statistics are showing improvement in the Mound View and Wellington neighborhoods. The city departments are now starting to work more closely and communicate more than in the past. He reiterated that the city needs its citizens to help. He stated that 90% of arrests are from civilian calls into the department. He encouraged everyone to call in any suspicious behavior and provide as many details as possible. Capt. Mellgren pointed out that the citizens know their neighborhood better than a police officer and their contribution is essential.

4. Pedestrian safety

- *High traffic area – cars and pedestrians*
- *Speed limits*
- *Crosswalks – several intersections without crosswalks/push buttons*
- *Jay-walking*
- *Bikes on sidewalks*
- *What can be done to improve safety of pedestrians?*

Cindy Davis, Lou Stark and Katie Roger spoke of the fear that customers and Coe College students, faculty and staff experience when walking on or near First Avenue. The intimidation factor is very high. Craig Erickson commented on the littering and loitering on First Avenue. The simple fact that groups of people congregate around certain areas with no regard for the safety and security of others, severely negatively affects the businesses in the Uptown College District. Capt. Walther said that since last year, the Department of Corrections, local school districts and juvenile court systems regularly meet and sometimes accompany officers on patrol. The goal of this collaboration is to pinpoint repeat offenders or youth violating parole and move to correct the behavior immediately. The police department is also looking at creating a loitering ordinance but finds it difficult to draft a policy that is constitutionally sound and would still correct the offending behavior.

The police department also said that jaywalkers and people impeding traffic flow on First Avenue are very hard to locate after the occurrence and citizen's assistance in that case is extremely helpful. Photos or descriptions will help police identify the offender. Mr. Denton added that prosecution of jaywalking and similar crimes carries only a simple misdemeanor and is often a city charge. Mr. Prosser offered that the city is looking at camera surveillance and will continue to explore that possibility. He also said that in the future, when First Avenue is re-surfaced or possibly widened, pedestrian safety be taken into consideration. First Avenue is designated as a highway but some serious thought should go into strategies for increasing accessibility of businesses along the route.

The special guests were very pleased that the neighborhood and businesses have come together are working toward positive improvements in the area. Citizen involvement and feedback is crucial to the success of the local area and city as a whole.

**Next Meeting: August 16, 2007
2 p.m., Lynch Room, Coe College**