

MAINE VOICES



File photo

Keeping neighborhoods safe and accessible is a proper police function.

CITY OF NEIGHBORHOODS

Cruising isn't illegal (yet), but it has a high social cost

● When a car circles a block 30 times, the idea its driver is checking out houses is somewhat less than credible.

By **MICHAEL CHITWOOD**

The centerpiece of community policing is the expressed willingness to provide citizens with solutions to conditions which diminish the quality of life they hope to enjoy.

This implies not only enforcement, but an equal energy devoted to comprehensive service strategies, action plans not constrained by the limited scope of criminal law.

This commitment to protect and enhance the positive attributes of Portland's neighborhoods forms the core value of my administration.

Such a view has propelled the Portland Police Department into the public arena on several key social issues: the concealed weapons debate, human rights for our gay/lesbian residents, improved security at the Maine Youth Center and the plight of the homeless mentally ill.

Each has been a prime example of the breadth of proactive policing initiatives which empowered those quality-of-life intangibles which make our city unique.

"CRUISING" presents us with a contemporary challenge to our collective ideas about the importance of neighborhood in our individual lives.

The question of neighborhood is one which often marks the signposts of our life. "Where we live" is an integral piece of who we are.

The decision is not necessarily limited to visible attributes like schools, sidewalks or property taxes, but also prompts an emotional dimension.

Neighborhood is what we feel. It is an environment of sense as much as sight, a conscious place to connect

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and, when needed, for solitude. It is the undeniable difference between simply having a place to live and calling somewhere home.

The families and residents in Parkside and on the Western Promenade have embraced the vision of community policing. Ours is a mutual response to the negative influence confronting their homes — legitimate fears held by reasonable people confronting the recurring, invasive anonymity reflected in cruising.

WHEN YOUR park, yard or driveway becomes an area for public sex or your children are trapped as accidental "witnesses" to it, then maybe your patience will begin to wear just as thin. One can be very judgmental when assessing abstractions.

I accept that cruising is not a crime. Yet, with poker face, we are asked to consider the possibility that endless circling is an exercise in real estate evaluation. The occasional irritant rises to a point that to witness the same car in its 30th loop wants to make you scream in frustrated anger. If it only were but one car

Cruising may not be a violation of the criminal code, but it certainly meets my understanding of a civil nuisance. The negative climate of larger cities is not only a byproduct of urban crime, but is fed by the cumulative deterioration that follows on the heels of uncivil behavior.

Panhandling, run-down tenements, unsupervised street youth — all are not crimes in the general sense, but concrete "conditions" that undoubtedly signal the first tremors of a downward spiral.

Crime prevention means just what it says: Get in early and stop it before it becomes unmanageable.

Our police and community letter-writing campaign was an attempt to reduce cruising in the least restrictive manner possible. Some have hinted this is a covert attack on gay rights. Wrong. Cruising is an activity involving both males and females, straights as well as gays.

Criminal law allows police officers to sanction only those acts which occur at the margin: in this case, sex which is purchased.

The bulk of these social transactions involve compulsive, high-risk practices which alarm public health professionals grappling with the sobering reality of sexually transmitted diseases. Driving in circles is not a crime, but the potential future medical costs are staggering.

The letters are serving the twofold purpose for which they were intended.

First, they remove the cloak of anonymity from those who choose to act in another's yard in a fashion I'm sure they would reject in their own.

Second, they have raised needed public awareness to the dilemma associated in abating intrusive, albeit non-criminal, conduct.

WE ARE FIRST and foremost a city of neighborhoods. I remain firmly convinced that we cannot turn away from the social disorders that threaten Portland's varied communities simply because they pose difficult public policy choices.

To do so suggests that some areas of our city deserve only qualified police support.

I intend over the coming weeks to work closely with members of the City Council and other interested community leaders in seeking legal remedies that will restore the sense of safety that has been lost by too many West End and Parkside families caught in the unfortunate cross-fire of a politically correct debate.

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