

Friday, April 28, 2006

Curbing Violence on Grand Avenue - A Message from Councilmember Patricia Kernighan

We have faced an unprecedented level of violent crime on Grand Avenue in the past several weeks. A series of armed robberies and now the tragic murder at Bangkok Palace restaurant Monday night have shaken this usually peaceful community.

Here is what I have done as your Councilmember to make the Grandlake safe again:

- Secured extra patrols and a Crime Reduction Team for the Grandlake area. This has already been implemented.
- Called an emergency Community Meeting on Thursday night, 4/27, at which the Police Chief and the City's Head of Neighborhood Services responded to the crime concerns of over 100 residents and merchants. (A summary follows.)
- Demanded that our Mayor and Police Chief restore a permanent Walking Officer to the Grand/Lakeshore commercial area.

Summary of Grandlake Community Meeting, 4-47-06

I called this neighborhood meeting on short notice because of the very high level of anxiety and concern in the community and the desire for an immediate response from the City. (I apologize to those did not get notice of the meeting in time to attend.) This is a summary of what discussed at the meeting.

The Grandlake neighborhood has been shaken by two murders that have occurred in the past five weeks. First was the insurance agent in his office last month (which was a planned "hit") and then this Monday night, the random and senseless shooting during a robbery in the Bangkok Palace restaurant at closing time. In addition, there have been several armed robberies reported in the past two weeks. This level of crime is totally unprecedented in the Grandlake neighborhood.

Over one hundred people attended the meeting at Barnett Hall on Lakeshore. Police Chief Wayne Tucker was present to listen to the community, as well as several OPD staff including the Problem-Solving Officer for our area, Jill Encinias. We began the meeting with an opportunity for members of the community speak. About 20 people spoke over a period of 45 minutes.

Public comments: Several long-time residents said that the Grandlake area has been relatively crime-free for the past 35 years and that they are saddened and angry to see this recent crime wave. Numerous people expressed anger and frustration that there is not more police presence on Grand and Lakeshore, and in particular, demanded that a

Walking Officer be restored. Quite a few noted that since former Walking officer Gino left two years ago, the presence of homeless people and aggressive panhandling has increased dramatically. A surprising number of people told of armed robberies and other crimes that have taken place in the area over the past month. Several people stated that the lack of visible police presence has been an invitation to criminals. One neighborhood activist said he believes we will lose all that is good about Oakland if we let our relatively healthy neighborhoods succumb to crime, which is beginning to happen due to the lack of adequate police services. Some people said the police focus on the wrong priorities, such as tickets for traffic violations; others strongly supported that kind of enforcement. Several folks noted that they don't want to get stuck in a mindset of fear, but rather want people to come together in the community to look out for one another. Others focused on the need to address the underlying causes of crime rather than rely solely on policing. The single point of most consensus was a call to get a walking officer back in the Grandlake.

Chief Tucker's responses: Oakland as a whole has seen a dramatic rise in armed robberies and assaults with a deadly weapon in the past year. Homicides so far this year, at 46, are about double what they were last year. Home burglaries are down, commercial burglaries are up. Oakland is not alone--many cities across the country are experiencing the same marked rise in crime. The New York Times recently had an article on the subject. Some analysts say this is partly due to a demographic bump in population of people in the 18-24 age group, which is the age group responsible for most crime. Other societal factors are also an influence. In Alameda County a big contributor is the large number of parolees released here (because this is where they were convicted) about 14,000 people total, 8,000-9,000 don't have the skills to get a job, so go back to re-offending.

Robbery investigations often reveal a pattern of a series of robberies by the same person or group. When they arrest one criminal, that person often has been responsible for 30 or more crimes. This was the case in Haddon Hill last Spring.

When asked how residents can see crime statistics, he said that the public crime data system is presently being re-vamped and is not working. He noted that I have specifically requested in a recent City Council meeting that crime data be made available in a usable format to Councilmembers and the public. [I will keep the pressure on to get this up and running.]

Current deployment of police resources is based on calls for service and predictable crime. [He didn't directly say so, but the result is that usually crime-free neighborhoods like Grandlake have been getting less coverage than areas with more crime and more calls for service.] Chief Tucker is very concerned about the jump in crime in the Grandlake and has assigned a Crime Reduction Team of officers to walk and patrol the area.

He spoke about the implementation of Measure Y, which is going slowly due to the time it takes to get new officers hired and trained. Fourteen new ones are coming out of Field

Training in a week. The policy set by the City is to assign them to the beats with the highest "stressors". By July of 2007, all 63 new community policing officers will be in place, which means every police beat will have its own officer.

Chief Tucker encouraged people to get involved in their Neighborhood Crime Prevention Councils, learn how to be alert of our surroundings, share information with neighbors, etc.

He also had this important SAFETY TIP:

If a life is in danger or a felony is in progress, Call 911 from a land line, or Call 777-3211 from a cell phone.

Program your cell phone to dial 777-3211 in case of emergency. Calling 911 from a cell phone connects you to the Highway Patrol and delays getting your call to the Oakland Police dispatcher.

Claudia Albano, Director of Neighborhood Services, urged everyone to volunteer to organize a Neighborhood Watch on their block. (Which about 30 people signed up to do.) Her staff will help people learn how to do it, and then will offer information and training on how to keep your house and yourself safe. Knowing your neighbors is a powerful way to keep your block safe. She and I also encouraged people to sign up for the Yahoo email groups which folks in the NCPCs use to communicate what is going on in their neighborhoods. Here is the information for the Grandlake NCPC:

The Grand Lake Community Council
Serving Beats 14Y/16X meets the first Tuesday of each month
Beginning at 7p.m. at The Neighborhood Center, 530 Lake Park Avenue
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/grandlakencpc>

For more information, please contact: Neighborhood Services Coordinator Hoang Banh at 238-6566 or hbanh@oaklandnet.com

As your Councilmember, I will continue to push our Mayor and Police Chief to assign a permanent walking officer to Grand and Lakeshore. I hope to have an answer from them in the next week. In the meantime, Chief Tucker has assigned extra patrols and a Crime Reduction Team to Grand Avenue to get our neighborhood back to normal. While we all appreciate this needed attention, I want a long-term, sustainable police presence on Grand and Lakeshore.

For more information about my efforts on behalf of District 2 residents, please visit: <http://www.patkernighan.com>

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