

THE ADVOCATE

NEWSPAPER ARCHIVES

Deputies start patrols in Melrose East

Advocate - Baton Rouge, La.

Author: PENNY BROWN ROBERTS

Date: Jul 12, 2005

Section: News

Those who live in Melrose East glimpsed a rare sight Monday evening - deputies from the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office cruising their streets and making arrests. The Melrose East Community Association passed a resolution asking the agency - which normally patrols the unincorporated areas of the parish - to provide extra security in the Baton Rouge neighborhood. Moments after the unanimous vote, the Sheriff's Office Special Community Anti-Crime Team, a temporary strike force, started investigating targeted sites and making traffic stops. Two hours later, there had been a handful of arrests.

"I feel greatly relieved," said real-estate investor Howard Gyler, president of the decade-old non-profit association of property owners and residents. "I think we're going to see immediate arrests and specific buildings that have been problems will no longer be problems."

The move comes just months after Baton Rouge Police Chief Jeff LeDuff reassigned two dedicated bicycle patrol officers from the high-crime neighborhood to provide security at the American Bowling Congress tournament downtown and write parking tickets. At the same time, normal patrols were stepped up.

That decision touched off a highly public rift between Gyler and Mayor-President Kip Holden.

Gyler, the managing partner of B-G&G, which has spent millions of dollars rehabilitating rental property in Melrose East, has blamed city-parish officials for recent shootings and deaths in the neighborhood and questioned Holden's need for a multimember security detail made up of police officers. Holden, in turn, has banned Gyler from his office.

The resolution passed Monday expresses concern that the removal of the dedicated patrol officers will "increase cost of housing" by forcing the low- and moderate-income community to hire a private security firm for patrols "or alternatively return to days of past."

It calls upon the Sheriff's Office to provide public safety and other law-enforcement measures to "allow opportunity for continued progress and recovery in the affordable housing neighborhood of Melrose East subdivision." While the decree is not legally binding, Sheriff's Office Col. Greg Phares said Monday it was enough to prompt the agency's unprecedented patrols within city limits.

In anticipation of the resolution, the Sheriff's Office has met with the Police Department in recent weeks to step up patrols during unspecified peak crime hours.

"The Sheriff's Office has a request from the taxpayers of the parish to assist in policing their area," Phares said. "We have responded to that request by coordinating our efforts with those of the primary policing agency, the Baton Rouge Police Department." Phares said the Sheriff's Office's primary responsibility "is always to the unincorporated areas of the parish, where we are the only law-enforcement agency. But we will assist the Baton Rouge Police Department in Melrose to the extent that we can spare the manpower and we'll try to coordinate our efforts so that Melrose gets the maximum bang for its buck from both agencies."

Melrose East is behind Bon Carre Town Center and generally bounded by Florida Boulevard to the south, Greenwell Springs Road to the north, North Ardenwood Drive to the west and Lobdell Avenue to the east.

Police Department statistics show Melrose East's major crime rate has dropped in the first quarter of 2005 compared with the same time period the previous year. Murders, rapes and robberies are up slightly; aggravated assaults, burglaries, larcenies and auto thefts are down.

Neither the city-parish government nor city police had representatives at Monday's meeting, but in an interview earlier in the day, Sgt. Don Kelly said the Police Department wasn't asked to attend. Holden's staff referred calls about the resolution to Hampton Grunewald, a spokesman for the mayor-president. He, in turn, referred all calls to LeDuff, saying, "The chief is handling this situation."

LeDuff said he believes the coordinated patrols between the Police Department and the Sheriff's Office are going to "work out."

"We're not upset about this at all," he said before the neighborhood association's meeting. "We have a plan and we're going to go at it. I've got one goal: I want to make Baton Rouge a safe place."

Kelly said the two agencies are sharing information on ongoing operations and law-enforcement problems, and described those sessions as "a very cooperative effort."

"We still patrol the area, we just don't have two officers dedicated exclusively. It's not like we've pulled out," Kelly said. "We plan to work with the Sheriff's Office, and hopefully between the resources they're dedicating and our patrol efforts, we'll have positive results."

Still, the two Baton Rouge police officers assigned to Melrose East likely won't be returning any time soon - even though the bowling tournament ended last week. "That's a decision for the chief and the mayor, but from what I've heard, I don't think there's any chance of putting dedicated officers in that neighborhood or any other neighborhood in the near future," Kelly said. "That benefits one area at the expense of others. We have only so many officers to go around, and when we dedicate one or two to an area to exclusion of everyone else, it becomes a fairness issue."

Gyler said the association's members in recent weeks have been under "tremendous pressure from the Mayor's Office not to go this route" - including threats to stop a proposed crime-prevention district measure currently under legislative review.

But Ferry Nichols, who has lived in Melrose East for nearly two decades, said the resolution seeking more patrols is worth it.

"I'm all for what we're trying to do," she said. "I've lived here long enough to know what's going on and what's not going on. I think this is exactly what we need."

[Illustration]

Photo: Color photo of Deputy Lawrence Hunt of the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's office approaching one of the many vehicles pulled over for traffic violations in the Melrose East neighborhood; B.W photo of Zack Gyler, Howard Gyler, Jim Colburn and other members of the Melrose East Community Association Board at a meeting (by Liz Condo); Color graphic shows where Melrose East is located (Advocate Map)