



White Plains battling perception of downtown problems

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WHITE PLAINS — Fueled by a spate of violent incidents involving young people and complaints about rowdy teenagers hanging out downtown, police and city officials are battling a growing perception that the business district is becoming a dangerous place to be.

"It is a perception, unfortunately, and it's something we have to take very, very seriously," said Paul Wood, the city's executive officer. "The fact is that White Plains is extremely safe.

"That said, it's extremely important for any city to project an image of safety. What's mind boggling is how a few incidents can create a perception of danger when that's not the reality at all."

Wood was referring to a fight on Mamaroneck Avenue and Mitchell Place on Sept. 29 that sent two city teens to the hospital with stab wounds and resulted in the arrest of two 19-year-olds from Yonkers on felony gang assault charges. Two days later, a 23-year-old Tarrytown man was charged with felony assault after police said he beat another man unconscious in a Mamaroneck Avenue bar.

Those assaults followed a Sept. 28 mugging on Old Mamaroneck Road; a Sept. 26 shootout at the Winbrook housing complex, in which no one was hurt; and a Sept. 11 shooting on Ferris Avenue that left a 23-year-old city man with a stomach wound.

This week, an 18-year-old was arrested after police said she accidentally shot her 23-year-old boyfriend at her Greenridge Avenue home. Both were charged with falsely reporting an incident and weapons charges after they told police the shooting occurred during a robbery.

While the later acts of violence did not take place in the business district, they stoked concerns that White Plains is unsafe. Anonymous and signed e-mails to local Web sites and The Journal News frequently mention teens congregating downtown as a cause of fear, and a call for more police.

"Our downtown has become a major hangout spot for kids," 46-year-old Karleen Bristol said after the stabbings on Mitchell Place. "It was only a matter of time before something like this happened. ... The city better do something to discourage all the hanging out that's going on, or we're going to end up with a serious problem here."

A city that long decried its lack of nightlife is in the midst of a building boom that has revitalized the downtown, and the city has become increasingly dependent on sales-tax revenue, so the stakes in the growing perception battle are huge. As Westchester County's shopping, government and legal center, White Plains simply can't afford an unsafe image.

"I'm very concerned about that perception, that young people are to be feared," said Rob Tamboia, acting president of the White Plains Downtown Residents Association. "We've had a few incidents, but I think people today are bound by fear. Overall, I think that our streets are safe and that White Plains is the safest city in Westchester."

Data provided by the White Plains Police Department show that between January and September, serious crime dropped by almost 7 percent citywide from the same period last year. Larcenies are down 8.5 percent, from 812 during the first nine months of 2005 to 743 during the same period this year.

The numbers for violent crimes are minuscule and almost statistically insignificant. There have been 34 robberies this year, for example, while 32 were reported during the same period in 2005. Non-domestic assaults are up slightly, to 33 this year, from 27 through September 2005.

Public Safety Commissioner Frank Straub said the increases reflected a national trend in violence, particularly among young people. Part of the reason, he said, is that funding for public safety is shrinking after years of lowering crime

rates. An example, he said, is the termination of the federal COPS program, which put thousands of police officers on the street during the 1990s and the earlier part of this decade.

"It's kind of a typical government response," Straub said. "Crime goes down across the country to record lows, national priorities change, police departments lose funds and vacancies are created."

While the city's police department has an authorized strength of 215 and has hired five officers this year, there are 15 vacancies as a result of retirements over the past several years. Two weeks ago, Mayor Joseph Delfino, who could not be reached for this report, authorized the hiring of 11 more cops in January — they'll be on the street by summer.

In the meantime, police in recent weeks have increased foot, bike, horse and motorcycle patrols in the business district and plan to park their communications van near Renaissance Square during the weekends, staffed by officers who will hand out information on crime and fire prevention, and various city programs.

A new initiative will have teams of uniformed officers actively engaging teens and other visitors about concerns. Cops also are working with the city Youth Bureau's "Step Up" program, helping at-risk young people find jobs, enroll in education and job programs, and learn problem-solving skills.

"The problem is that kids tend to cluster in the downtown, and that can be intimidating to some people," Straub said. "It's a perception problem. They horseplay and push each other around and use rough language. That's the hub of their social life, and it's been that way for generations. It was greasers with leather jackets in the 1950s, hippies with long hair in the '60s and '70s, and now it's kids with baggy pants and hoodies. Kids are oblivious — they don't realize that they may seem frightening to others."

Wood said the city constantly evaluated and adjusted police deployment in the downtown, looking for a balance that was reassuring but not intimidating.

"When the City Center first opened, we had the police van down there and a lot of uniformed presence, and it scared some people," he said. "They thought something must be going on to attract so many police. You can't have a cop on every corner or it looks like a police state and makes people uncomfortable."

One solution, city officials agree, might be the expansion of the White Plains Business Improvement District's Downtown Ambassador program, a summer jobs effort that trains and hires high school students to meet and greet merchants and visitors, provide them with information about the city and report problems. The BID serves as a liaison between local merchants and the city.

"The ambassadors do a great job," Common Council President Rita Malmud said. "They're non-threatening, and having them out there shows a civic presence that's positive and reassuring."

Rick Ammirato, executive director of the BID, said the group was considering making the ambassador program a year-round effort and hiring adults to supplement the students employed during the summer. He said merchants have not complained about the throngs of young people downtown.

"Our main concern is that they keep the sidewalks clear and don't wander onto the street, and I think the police do a great job in that regard," he said.

"The city is growing and it's growing rapidly," Straub said, "and policing the city can't be static. It has to evolve as problems occur and issues emerge. You have to adjust accordingly, and that's what we're doing. Downtown White Plains has become an attractive place for everyone, and you see that on the streets. People come here because it's safe, whether you're a kid or an adult. But it takes more than just police to keep it that way. If parents, community groups and city agencies aren't all engaged, there's only so much police can do."
