

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Comments to the DDA—September 1, 2010

Last night the Downtown Area CAC had as its guests Police Chief Barnett Jones and Deputy Chief John Seto, as well as Council Member Sabra Briere. For two hours we discussed in depth the issues of crime, panhandling, and the problems of Police enforcement in the downtown area as well as throughout the town.

The discussion was prompted by the expressed concern of downtown residents that petty street crime and aggressive panhandling appeared to be on the rise. With its rise, some downtown residents expressed an increasing sense of loss of downtown public safety. Some of us attributed this to the reduction in sidewalk police presence downtown. One of our members, the Condo President of Sloan Plaza, reported 5 security issues in a period of one month. "Twice a homeless person broke into our lobby and stole some minor items—we captured that on video and he was arrested and is in Washtenaw jail right now." Other incidents included a stolen bike, homeless people sleeping behind the building and a "smash and grab" break in of one of the autos there. These are only examples. Last night, CAC members as well as the police expressed concern with the recent "punk week" problems that have appeared and a newer "punk life style" crime element in the town-- largely made up of recent out-of-town arrivals. These were described as homeless because they choose to be. We hear reports of an increase of people sleeping in the streets, parks, under the bridges. Panhandling is more aggressive. Liberty Plaza is becoming a problem once again.

You already know of CAC concerns about Courthouse Square, and we thank Mayor Hieftje for trying to help us with those issues. Last night we were very impressed with Police Chief Jones and Deputy Seto's presentation of the current police situation. We admire their ability to cope with the problems of crime in this city with a drastically reduced police force. It was pointed out that, although this will probably end up being our highest year for rapes, crime statistics are generally going down, arrests are up, indicating greater efficiency—and that with a police force that used to be 216 and is now 124. But the police need help. This is important to the entire community-- a city-wide problem.

After much discussion—we tried to look for solutions. Sabra Briere committed herself to submit a resolution to City Council on September 20. Resurrect the 2001-2003 Panhandling Task Force. We promised support of the CAC and, hopefully, the Downtown Marketing Task Force. Are current laws being enforced? Are new updated laws and actions needed? What are they? Restrict panhandling in some areas? More policemen? Outreach? How? We are interested in well-conceived pro-active solutions.

The 2001 "Taskforce to Address Panhandling Concerns" by 2003 evolved into the "Mayor's Downtown Street Outreach Taskforce" and finally the Taskforce on Aggressive Panhandling.—It established an Outreach program with the help of Charles Coleman from Dawn Farms; a fundraising "Loose Change for Real Change" program and, with the help of Joan Lowenstein, strengthened the City's Panhandling Ordinance.

Street Exhibit Program--Dedication and Celebration—September 28—Huron and State