

'We don't even feel safe in our houses'

RESIDENTS DEMAND MORE OFFICERS

By Beth Church

Fearful of drug dealing, gang activity, fighting in the streets and spreading vandalism, nearly 20 residents pleaded with Rossford City Council on Monday evening to hire more police officers.

"What do we have to do to get more police officers? You have some serious, serious problems," said a resident of the 100 block of Glenwood Road.

"I didn't move into Rossford to be scared, You're getting a black eye."

The resident described problems of gang activity, loitering, spray-painted garages and damaged property.

He noted that Northwood has 22 police officers in comparison to Rossford's 12 officers. In the mid-1990's, the department had 18 officers.

"I think we need to put a levy on, to do something," he said.

A Walnut Street resident said she has called the police because of fighting and people doing drugs in the backyards.

"I'm a single parent, and I need help. I can't do this by myself," she said. "I have had enough. It's time to do something about it."

A mother on Glenwood Road said she is afraid to allow her 3-year old son to go swimming outside because of the drug activity.

"In broad daylight, we have things stolen out of yard," she said.

A Walnut Street resident told council that she called the police numerous times.

"The gangs are taking over our street," she explained. "They break things in yards, these kids are very, very disrespectful – it's getting bad."

Another Walnut Street resident said she and her husband moved from east Toledo to Rossford, "thinking it was a nice peaceful area."

She suggested that auxiliary officers be hired and a Block Watch program be started.

On Walnut Street neighbor said he called police four times last week about the crowds in the street.

“The language is appalling,” he explained. “My wife had to take our three children out of the frontyard because of the language-in this community.”

After he asked the juveniles to watch their language, his vehicle was broken into, he added.

“It is a serious situation,” he said. “The police, they do understand what’s going on, but they’re understaffed.”

Another Walnut Street resident attributed many problems to residents living in rental properties.

She believes the suspects are listening to the police scanner because they leave after the police are called about fighting and drug activity.

She also told council that she requires her son to check in every 30 minutes with her to make sure he is safe.

“I moved here from Toledo for safety,” she said. “I know there’s good people here.”

A neighbor in the 100 block of Glenwood Road said he believes Rossford officers are in danger when only one is available to respond to a call.

“I’m concerned for their safety,” he said. “They’re overworked, they need a break- they need some help.”

A downtown business owner told council that she has witnessed numerous drug deals taking place on the sidewalk on Superior Street.

Drug dealers sit on the benches and people drive up to buy drugs, she said.

She asked council to commit to improving downtown Rossford.

“I realize the Crossroads is important, but don’t lose your faith in downtown. Look at some of these empty buildings. People want to make a showplace of the downtown too,” she said. “It’s not just about the Crossroads.”

The resident also cited the spree of 40 mailboxes vandalized during spring break by juveniles, who were arrested by police.

“We need to focus on who these kids are, who their parents are and what we can do to help,” she said.

Another Glenwood resident questioned whether a city curfew could be set so officers have a way to cite juveniles.

“Instead of just saying ‘break it up and go home,’ the police can do something,” she said.

Officer Glenn Goss, Director of the Rossford Police patrolmen's Association, thanked the citizens for their comments on behalf of the police.

"We appreciate their support, and we'll continue to be diligent in our law enforcement," he said. "We hope you continue to help us by being our eyes and ears in the community."

Councilman Greg Marquette questioned City Administrator Ed Ciecka about whether city officials were aware of the extent of the problems.

Mr. Ciecka said he earlier had been contacted by many residents attending the meeting, and spoke with the police chief about the problems.

Police Chief Bo Vespi was deployed in May with the U.S. Coast Guard to serve in Iraq. Sergeant Todd Kitzler is serving as the acting chief.

Acting Chief Kitzler has recommended re-establishing a bike patrol as an immediate attempt to curb the problems.

Mayor Bill Verbosky pledged to look into the problem for residents.

"I understand I need to keep this town safe, as mayor," he said. "No one cares about the downtown more than I do. I worked with a lot of business owners to actively try to keep business in the downtown area."

For several years, Mayor Verbosky has advocated the addition of part-time officers to the police department.

At the council meeting, he declined to elaborate on a part-time plan because city officials are no in negotiations with the police union on the labor contract.

Officer Greg Linkous told council he does not believe part-time officers are the solution.

"You want professionals to handle your problems, don't call in part-timers. These people deserve better. We deserve better. You deserve better," he said, as residents applauded him.

He also noted that the bike patrol would help but requires officers to work overtime. Officer Linkous said he worked more than 500 hours of overtime last year.

Council President Larry Oberdorf pledged his personal assistance to residents.

"What I hear really concerns me. It concerns me you have to be confronted by these people," he said. He complimented Rossford officers for their work.

"When It comes down to them doing their jobs, there's no department with finer officers," he said.

The council president spoke with Chief Vespi before he left about a Block Watch program, and promised he would meet with Acting Chief Kitzler to see how he can help.

Council member Caroline Zuchowski Eckel said she shared the residents' frustration and has called the police about repeated vandalism since December.

"I understand your pain – my neighbors and I feel it too," she said.

She suggested that auxiliary officers could be a solution to the problem.

Councilman Jim Richards said he is proud of the service from the police department, but he also is "concerned if we can afford to pay the bill if we expand our police department."

"I don't see an easy solution," he said.

Councilman Rick Kovach, a former law enforcement officer, said he also had met with Chief Vespi after hearing residents' concerns.

"There's things you can do to solve the problem," he said. "The scanner situation has been around for years."

Councilman Leonard Michaels suggested that undercover police work in the affected neighborhoods could help.

He also questioned whether rental property owners could be held partially responsible for criminal activity.

Another Glenwood neighbor advocated a police levy to pay for additional officers.

"Block Watch is not enough," she said. "Your officers are trying to be in two places at once. We don't even feel safe in our houses."

"Kids are in the backyards with sticks taped to knives running around stabbing things. Kids call us out of the house to fight us."

"We are begging you as parents, as neighbors – don't wait for someone to be shot and killed," she said. "I'm very discouraged and very upset."

Mayor Verbosky noted that Rossford voters approved a 3.5 mill levy three years ago to pay for city services, maintenance and equipment, "and it would be up to council to increase that."

He explained that the city faced a major deficit several years ago, and acknowledged that the police department "took a big hit" during budget cuts.

"We are coming out of that," he said.

However, he noted that adding four to five officers with wages and benefits, "you're talking a lot of money."

In the past, he said the federal Cops FAST grant program was helpful to small communities, but that money has since been diverted to anti-terrorist work.

Mayor Verbosky promised he would meet with Acting Chief Kitzler, Council President Oberdorf and other city leaders soon to discuss a plan of action.

“I think we have a lot of good ideas and a lot of things we can take a look at,” the mayor said.

Council’s next meeting is at 7 p.m., Monday, June 23, at the municipal building, 133 Osborn Street. The meeting is open to the public.