

CROWD DEFIANCE IN OLD SACRAMENTO

Article

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Friday and Saturday nights in Old Sacramento are filled with the sounds of thumping car

stereos, police sirens, and screeching tires. By ten-thirty at night, the cruisers have clogged the streets and police have blocked the entrances into the popular night spot and tourist attraction. The police direct annoyed new arrivals to park in nearby parking garages. For the next few hours, officers on foot and in cars will attempt to discourage violence and loitering among young men in sports jerseys and sagging trousers. Finally, when the four large nightclubs close for the night, hundreds of liquored-up young people exit their doors and begin milling around in the streets. Some are simply making a last minute attempt to get a phone number from their attractive dance partner, but many stay for the show.

Dubbed the “side show” in Oakland, this post-closing behavior includes fights, drinking, reckless and drunken driving, swarm robberies, and defiance towards law enforcement. Each evening ends similarly. The police try to move crowds to their cars and onto the freeway, sometimes having to resort to the use of skirmish lines. Members of the crowd, meanwhile, are defying the officers by lingering in the streets, sitting in cars with stereos blasting, using their cars to block a street while they dance, and all the while directing rude comments towards police and any other person with the misfortune of crossing their path.

What has caused this phenomenon, which is not unique to Sacramento? Some argue that hip hop music is to blame. Others point the finger at youthful machismo mixed liberally with alcohol and sometimes drugs. But what do those closest to this issue think?

In April of 2003, a group of persons keenly interested in this issue met for a day-long discussion of issues related to disturbances at large entertainment venues. Sitting amongst this group were such diverse participants as a police captain, a downtown community activist, officers from the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, and a nightclub owner. This group

discussed the behaviors described above and the trends which would influence these in the future.

Trends are defined as a series of incidents or occurrences which seem to indicate a direction in which a particular issue may be heading. The group identified some key trends which are significantly impacting disturbances at large entertainment venues. First, and with greatest impact, is the crowd behaviors which include showing off, spectating, defiance, risk taking, and confrontation. The police officers commented on how problematic this behavior was to them. The community activist noted how fearful residents were in their own neighborhoods when confronted with the behavior. Most participants felt this trend would worsen in the near future. An interesting exception to this was the nightclub owner, who reasoned that as musical trends changed, the behaviors would diminish.

The second trend discussed was that of the increasing need for crowd control before, during, and after events. The group recognized that this had greatly increased over the last five years. The law enforcement participants believed this trend would diminish over time as cities begin to take a harder line against disruptive behavior.

The third trend was that of increasing police costs associated with policing entertainment venues during tough economic times. The group as a whole recognized the cyclical nature of this issue, as the economy would rebound in the future.

Trend Four was increasing need for communication amongst the stakeholders. All participants in the discussion group, including the nightclub owner, expressed a desire to be involved in the planning and implementation discussions relative to law enforcement in entertainment venues.

Trend Five focused on the driving behaviors observed around entertainment venues, such as cruising, drunken driving, reckless driving, and traffic congestion. The law enforcement participants felt this disruptive behavior was likely to continue, and reflected an increased societal tolerance of disruptive behaviors in public. The community activist felt this trend has the highest possible impact on the issue, while the nightclub owner thought the impact was minimal.

Increasing criminal behavior in and around entertainment zones was the next trend identified. There was an interesting split in the opinions of the members. The law enforcement officers all felt the trend would decrease over time, while the civilian participants thought it would worsen.

The seventh trend was the increase in guidelines and laws regulating entertainment establishments. Most felt that these would increase significantly over time, but would only moderately affect the issue.

Trend Eight was identified as the use of outside promoters. These outside promoters are hired by businesses to present an event. These promoters may have no stake in the community and are therefore perceived to be less responsible in their behaviors. Most participants thought this trend was likely to have a significant impact on the issue, but would decrease in the future. The community activist thought this problem would worsen over time.

The ninth trend identified was that of community satisfaction with city service. The group as a whole thought communities would be less and less satisfied over time, and that this trend would significantly impact the ability of law enforcement to manage crowds at large entertainment venues.

The final trend was that of the increasing number of permits for entertainment-related

businesses issued by local government. It was generally agreed that within ten years there would be a decrease due to saturation of areas and stricter guidelines in awarding permits.

One of the most significant concepts that emerges from this summary of the meeting is that no one was seeing this issue in quite the same way. Each participant interpreted the trends from his or her own perspective. This serves to highlight the great need for more effective stakeholder communication, as identified in trend four. But more than this, it requires greater understanding. Those in the community, including law enforcement, must value the business owners, who generate revenue to support public works. Business people, in turn, must value police time and act proactively to ensure their patrons do not harm the public good. Business people must understand the limited resources available to law enforcement, and the effect on the community when those resources are pulled to manage disruptive crowds at entertainment venues.

Based on this research, the development of an Entertainment Venue Committee is recommended, which would include a broad spectrum of stakeholders. This committee should include the chief of police, members of the city council, police managers, front line officers, entertainment business owners, merchants associations, community activists, civil rights organizations, patrons, private security companies, officers from the Alcoholic Beverage Control, local government employees, and members of the media. This group must be committed to spending the time necessary to come to a full understanding of the perspectives of each participating stakeholder. If successful in doing so, they will be able to reach consensus decisions which reflect the best interests of the community as a whole. This group should also wield considerable power in the development of entertainment ordinances and voluntary

guidelines for businesses.

Responding appropriately to the trends observed by this group of stakeholders will certainly benefit this issue in the short term. But these are ultimately reactive responses. The question still remains; why are young people today behaving in this fashion? What can and should communities, or society as a whole, do in response to this increasing public disorder?

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