

local news

Portland police officials say they will immediately increase bureau bike and horse patrols in the Southwest Stark Street area in light of a recent rash of assaults that has occurred along the gay-frequented strip.

Ed May, commander of Central Precinct, made that pledge following an Oct. 24 meeting with an estimated 40 Stark Street area proprietors who expressed concern over the matter.

"We tried to hammer out a plan to deal with this," May tells *Just Out*. "Historically we have seen juvenile street kids—younger teenagers who were on the streets for a variety of reasons—hanging around. They generally did not pose the same kind of problems that we're seeing now."

According to May, during the past several months there has been a notable increase in what he describes as "the transient population" throughout the city.

"It's a slightly older crowd—people between the ages of 19 and 25—grunge kids and road warriors who can be hostile, particularly if they are in groups. We're dealing with a different kind of kid," he says.

Indeed, witnesses say as many as two dozen young people—some purportedly wielding pipes and knives—went on a mini-rampage along Stark Street around 11 pm on Oct. 15.

"It was a war zone. I don't know what better way to describe it," says an employee of a Stark Street bar frequented by many gay men.

The source, who asked not to be identified, witnessed much of the incident.

"We locked the doors and told folks not to go out because people were being beaten up," says the source. "Kids were hitting people with fists and pipes. Other kids had knives that they were using to keep anyone from intervening. There was one man on the ground encircled by about 10 kids. At first I thought they were trying to help him but then I saw that they were kicking and punching him. He was all bloody—his head was solid red."

According to the source, bar personnel dialed 911, and the police arrived several minutes later.

Also that same night Portland police dispatchers received two bomb threats against Eagle PDX, a gay bar a few blocks from Stark Street.

"Two calls to police dispatchers were placed two minutes apart," says James Bellah, a Portland detective assigned to the bureau's bias crimes unit.

In the first call, which came in about midnight, Bellah says the caller said, "Hi. How are you? There's a bomb at the Eagle." In the second, the caller said, "There's a bomb at the Eagle and I put it there."

Richard Myrick, an Eagle PDX employee, says another bomb threat was placed to an upstairs pay phone in the building.

Bellah speculates the calls were made by a disgruntled former employee or bar patron.

"If the threats were gay-related, the caller

Night sweats

Violence on Stark Street is on the rise—even with increased police patrols clubgoers and workers are wary

by Inga Sorensen

would have probably said something like 'I'm going to blow you faggots up.' That wasn't the case," Bellah says.

May, meanwhile, says police don't know if the Stark Street assaults and bomb threats are somehow related.

Nonetheless, Myrick is on edge. When he leaves in the wee hours after the bar closes, he is admittedly nervous. "I used to feel really safe, but not anymore," he says. "Now you see a lot of threatening stuff on the street."

Two nights later, around 11:30, another violent incident occurred. A group of eight people were walking from C.C. Slaughters, a Stark Street gay bar, to Eagle PDX when they encountered

"There was a group of youth but it was really one kid who was out there looking to hurt someone," says Rose. "He jumped on me, and kicked me hard in the back of the leg."

Rose says he has been going to Stark Street for 15 years and has never before encountered such violence. He says the following day his knee was so swollen he could not walk. He also sustained injuries to his chest, jaw and arm. He contacted a friend to drive him to the emergency room.

"I'm still hobbling from the attack," he told us a week after the altercation.

Rose adds that he heard the man, who was "at least 17 or 18," hurl an anti-gay slur during the fight.



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

what they term a hostile young adult.

"We were trying to walk down the street and these kids were totally stretched out across it," explains Lynn Davis, the kitchen manager at C.C. Slaughters. "I accidentally bumped one of them when I was trying to step over them."

Davis says words were exchanged. "The next thing I know, this kid grabs a crutch from someone next to him and comes at me, cracking me right in the head," he says.

After running to a nearby establishment to call 911, Jeff Rose, 40, intervened to help his dazed and bloodied friend.

"He said 'Faggot.' At that point, a young woman who was with that crowd said that wasn't cool, and that they could 'really get in trouble now.'"

Suzanne Noviks, manager at C.C. Slaughters, witnessed the whole scene: "These kids are out of control. They have no fear at all."

Though police reportedly took statements in each instance, Bellah says he has received no information that any of those incidents were bias-related.

LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project's Anti-

Violence Project, which runs a hate crime/anti-violence reporting hot line geared toward Oregon's sexual minorities community, says she did not receive any calls either.

May says he isn't sure why there is an apparent influx of this newer breed of violent young person. Additionally, he stresses that an increase isn't only being seen along Stark Street. He says transients are showing up in growing numbers on the east side, notably the Hawthorne neighborhood, as well.

Stark Street does seem to be a popular locale, however.

"They go there to panhandle. We're hearing that when people refuse to give them money, they make derogatory remarks relating to sexual orientation," says May. "One of the concerns I have is that some of the activity flirts very close to bias crime, if not actually crosses that line. When that happens it is that much more serious. In fact, I explained what constituted a bias crime to business owners during the meeting so we could get a better sense of what's going on."

Portland Police Bureau spokesman Lt. Cliff Madison, adds: "We're not totally sure why there appears to be an increase in problems. It may have to do with drugs or perhaps the weather. It's getting colder, and the kids may be getting more desperate to get money in order to find a warm place to stay."

May asks that the public not cater to panhandlers' requests. "If you do, the problem will get worse," he says.

At the same time, he encourages people to steer clear of potentially inciting dialogue with street people.

"Just walk away, don't respond by saying 'Get a job,'" he says.

During their recent meeting, May and Stark Street businesspeople talked about removing awnings to deter panhandlers, and posting notices discouraging such activity.

"And we want to have good police presence, that's why we're making the immediate move to bring in more horse and bike patrols," he says.

Several of the people we spoke with about the recent rash of assaults, however, criticized the police for what they feel is a lax response.

William Warren, a crime prevention specialist and member of the Sexual Minorities Roundtable, a regular gathering of members of the sexual minorities community and Portland police officials, offers some additional tips.

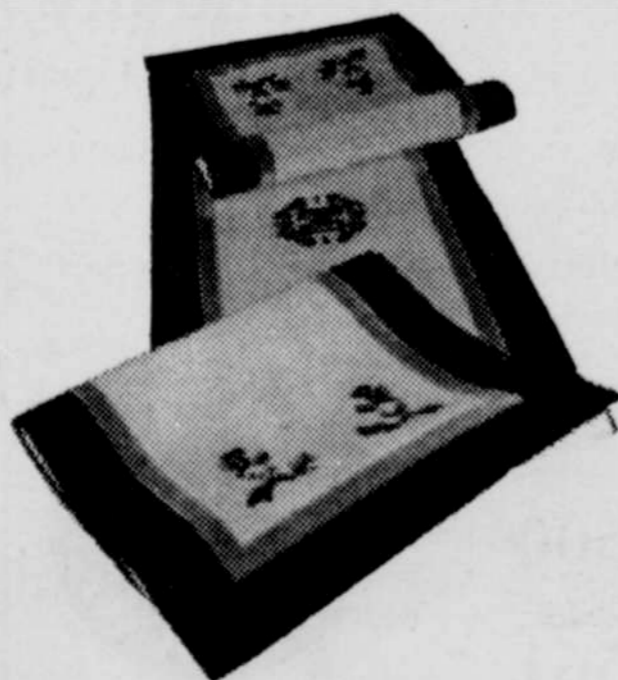
"First and foremost, trust your guts. If you go home with somebody, make sure you alert a friend. Cross the street if you [are made to] feel uncomfortable by a person or a rowdy group on the street. Call 911 if you have to, or get a bartender to do it," he advises. "And if you see police patrolling the area, tell them you're glad they are there and that their presence makes a difference."

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