**Sarasota sends prostitution warning letters to vehicle owners**

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The Sarasota Police Department has started sending “advisory” letters to owners of vehicles seen in areas known for criminal activity, a new weapon against the ongoing prostitution problem in the North Trail area.

The letters are not “accusatory” and involve no criminal charges, however a case number is generated while documenting the incident, the department said.

“We’re trying to change to reputation of the North Trail, and in order to do that we’re going to take drastic measures to deter prostitution in the city,” police Chief Bernadette DiPino said.

The letters, which began going out Tuesday, state the vehicle was observed at a specific day and time “at an area within the city limits of Sarasota known for prostitution related crimes” and that the driver was talking to someone previously convicted of prostitution or an undercover officer posing as a prostitute.

For years, the city has been trying to revitalize the North Tamiami Trail area, centered around U.S. 41 between University Parkway and 10th Street. Numerous undercover operations have led to the arrests of johns and prostitutes but the problems have continued.

Before the city sends a letter, a driver must do something overtly related to prostitution, said Sgt. Demetri Konstantopoulos of the department’s Street Crimes Unit. The act could be observed by patrol or undercover officers.

Often, suspicious activity — such as a known prostitute getting in the vehicle — is observed by officers but there is not probable cause to make an arrest, he said.

“It’s not an indiscriminate thing,” Konstantopoulos said.

Reports on such activity are still made, and a decision to send a letter could be made after that, he said.

The vehicles can be either personal or business, police spokeswoman Genevieve Judge said.

During a recent undercover sting, “sometimes it was people in their work trucks,” she said.

Konstantopoulos said the plan and letters were vetted by the city attorney for possible legal concerns.

“It’s another tool for us to put in our tool box for the fight against prostitution,” DiPino said in a news release.