

Neighbors fight prostitution on Flint's east side

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FLINT — The black pick-up truck slowed, but didn't fully stop near the corner of Belle and Lewis Streets, but that didn't deter a nearby woman from hopping in the cab.

Clad in jean shorts and a pink tank top, the blond woman — identified by residents as a “neighborhood prostitute” — slammed the passenger door shut as the truck sped away, driving past two watchful moms with young children on the front lawn.

“Yeah, keep on movin’!” resident Michelle Verdier yelled before turning to her friend. “Just wait — she’ll be back in an hour.”

Such is life on Flint’s east side, where every day it seems there’s a push-and-pull struggle between the neighborhood residents and the men and women engaging in the world’s oldest profession.

Claims of rampant prostitution in Flint aren’t new, but police and residents alike say it’s gotten noticeably worse in the past two or three years.

While prostitutes can be found in many parts of the city, no other community seems to be hit quite as hard or for as many years as the east side, where efforts to intimidate hookers have received national media attention.

Some frustrated residents hang naked dolls from trees in effigy and post “No Ho Zone” signs along the streets. One resident buried a mannequin upside down in the yard alongside a “No trespassing” sign.

Depending on who you ask, prostitution is increasing due to a number of factors: lack of police presence, the housing crisis or the economic recession.

The number of prostitution-related arrests in the city is actually down from three years ago, but police say that’s more a function of police resources than fewer prostitutes roaming the streets.

Flint police Lt. Collin Birnie said prostitution has become a bigger problem in the past couple of years, specifically on the east side.

“It goes around the clock because unfortunately it’s drug related,” Birnie said. “They’re working to support a drug habit and drugs don’t have a time of day.”

The community is particularly vocal about it these days, as business owners fear regular prostitute sightings are scaring away an already meager customer base and parents say their daughters can’t walk to work without getting propositioned for sex. Residents say they’ve found condoms and even sex toys in and around abandoned homes and on street curbs.

Though Birnie said he couldn't detail what police are doing to catch prostitutes, he said there are regular stings and arrests. But residents say it isn't enough — the problem has grown too severe.

"It spreads like a cancer," said David Caswell, a community activist. "When we work with the police and put the pressure on in one area, then it moves it around."

The problem has become so pronounced on the east side that the local Citizens Nuisance Task Force, which was originally formed seven years ago to address trash and graffiti, is now directing most of its attention to fighting prostitution.

The group's leader, Michael Tobias, said he's met with police Chief Alvern Lock about the issue several times and is noticing more of a police presence in the area.

Still, Tobias' worst fear is that concerned residents — those who have never before broken the law — will act rashly out of frustration.

"The decent people in that neighborhood are getting very, very concerned," Tobias said. "The last you want is for citizens to take the law into their own hands."

According to residents, verbal clashes with prostitutes and the so-called johns who solicit them are practically inevitable.

Verdier and her neighbor, Donna MacDonald, said not a day goes by that they don't interact with a prostitute, usually by shouting at them get off their street.

Resident Dave Hurley, who owns several area rental properties, said he writes down license plate numbers of solicitors, issues verbal threats to hookers and has even tailed suspected johns out of the city to homes in Davison and Flushing.

He asked his 16-year-old daughter to carry a brick with her to work for protection because she's been propositioned for sex several times, and urges his neighbors to shoo the prostitutes away.

He's also doing his best to clean up the neighborhood. It's his way of intimidating prostitutes, johns and drug dealers.

"The more you stand up and chase people off, the less likely they are to come back," he said. "The police are trying their best but it's like after they book them they're back out on the streets."

Genesee County Sheriff Robert J. Pickell said his deputies conduct regular stings along Dort Highway, and they've arrested police officers, school teachers and clergy -- among other members of society -- for solicitation.

Pickell said his ultimate goal is to discourage johns from soliciting the prostitutes in the first place.

"You're not going to put a prostitute out of business -- they just move around," Pickell said. "What we try to do is cut into their supply."

Pickell's office started impounding the vehicles of johns arrested for soliciting prostitutes and charging them \$900 to get it back. A portion of the fees goes toward the prosecutor's office to assist in prosecuting the crime, he said.

Genesee County Prosecutor David S. Leyton said the regular police presence and routine stings have helped lessen the problem.

Prostitution along Dort Highway seems to have decreased since the sheriff's office stepped in, he said.

The \$900 fee for johns to retrieve their vehicles goes a long way toward deterring repeat solicitors, he said.

“With that fee, usually the spouse finds out,” Leyton said. “We haven’t had a lot of repeat customers.”

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