

ELECTRIC AVENUE

TAMING AN ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT

CALGARY POLICE SERVICE, ALBERTA, CANADA, 1994

THE PROBLEM: Twenty-four bars bordered an inner-city residential community. Over time, this area quickly became a single-use bar destination in which businesses were forced to move due to the noise, crime, and filth, which became the trademark of this area. The area developed a reputation as “the place to go for a good time,” where the rules of everyday society no longer applied. The surrounding residential community suffered, and the entire city suffered as this area required more and more police presence.

ANALYSIS: An analysis of crime trends revealed that street robberies, auto thefts, theft and damage to vehicles and drunken disturbances were the primary crime problems. Residents complained of noise, garbage, and property damage. Businesses merely blamed each other and the police for not controlling the violence and property damage. Whereas, the police believed businesses failed to cooperate with each other, felt a lack of direction from the department, and cited a lack of equipment as contributing to the area’s disorder.

RESPONSE: Regulatory, architectural, and operation changes were made to solve the underlying problems and reduce crime. Crime prevention through environmental design was used to discourage crime. A taskforce was formed to encourage communication and cooperation among businesses, and the police. A community partnership was also formed to assist the police in identifying and rectifying problems.

ASSESSMENT: Violent, property crime, weapons complaints, complaints against police officers and assaults on police officers decreased substantially. The architectural changes served to develop an ongoing respect for people and property in the district.

INTRODUCTION

The 1650 men and women of the Calgary Police Service are responsible for policing the City of Calgary with a growing population of 750,000. The city is located in the Province of Alberta at the foot of the Rocky Mountains and covers an area of approximately 280 square miles. The Service has been fundamentally committed to the practice of Community Based Policing since

1974 when it adopted a zone policing method of delivering service to the public.

During the mid 1980s, an area in the city began to develop a reputation as a “the place to go for entertainment” and by the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, 24 bars had located in a one-and-a-half block section of 11th Avenue S.W. This area became known as “Electric Avenue.” Nearly every night, as many as 10,000 people began to congregate in this area nightly in search of a

“good time.” Crime trends increased disproportionately to that of other areas of the city and became the focus of a new phenomenon, that of the spontaneous celebration after a major sporting event. The dynamics involved in this scenario compelled the Service to re-evaluate the approach of trying to deal with each situation individually. Rather, the Service embarked upon an overlapping approach to problem resolution.

SCANNING

The primary problem was the licensing of 24 bars in an area bordered by an inner-city residential community. This area quickly became a single use bar destination in that other businesses were forced to move due to the noise, crime, and filth, which became the trademark of this area. Opportunistic bar operators joined responsible bar owners on the Avenue and a competition for revenue began. Everything from neighbourhood pubs to high intensity, heavy metal and funk clubs opened in anticipation of cashing in on the windfall of the Winter Olympics. On the heels of these games, the Calgary Flames won the Stanley Cup and the ensuing celebration in which tens of thousands of people converged on the Avenue served to set the expectations for future events.

Violence in the form of countless nightly assaults, disturbances and street robberies culminated in the summer of 1992 with the separate homicides of two young people. This was combined with a corresponding rise in property offences totalling in the thousands of occurrences. The Service was grappling with an area that was being promoted as “The Entertainment District.” An area where people were encouraged to go for a good time and which developed a reputation Canada wide as the place to go.

In addition to nightly problems that both the Police Service and the community were forced to contend with football, hockey, and baseball championships provided the backdrop for patrons to go to a place where the normal rules of society were perceived not to apply. The area developed a continuous “Mardi Gras”

atmosphere which the media played a significant role in promoting.

The surrounding residential community was most impacted by this problem, although the entire city suffered as this area required more and more police presence. The Electric Avenue area was originally designed to accommodate offices, which would pose little interference with the bordering residential community. However, the zoning for this area allowed for virtually any kind of use. At one point during the summer of 1992, noise meters were used to determine decibel levels at 3:00 a.m. and they were determined to be approximately that of a Boeing 737 warming up on the tarmac. With thousands of patrons converging on this area, parking, auto thefts, damage and theft from motor vehicles became ancillary problems, which the community became subjected to.

The Police Service began responding to the rise in crime by deploying additional resources to this area to combat the increased demands for service. By 1992, it was estimated that the cost of policing this block and half was in excess of one million dollars annually. Most of the earlier attempts to deal with crime were met with frustration as individual city and provincial departments were all working independently to deal with their respective responsibilities. Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and the Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALGB) were also being taxed to their limits in responding to the environment created on the Avenue.

Responsible operators and the remaining businesses were being adversely affected by the growth of popularity of the Avenue and were at a loss to cope effectively with the rogue operators and the increase in problems associated with the area. The Avenue became unsafe for the young people to whom the businesses had originally catered.

Increased noise, garbage, parking complaints, property damage and thefts were all directly attributed to the rise in popularity of the Avenue. Many of these offences were an annoyance to area residents, but when some became additionally victimized by being robbed and assaulted (both physically and sexually) the

community developed an antagonistic posture towards all the businesses on the Avenue.

The Police Service was impacted by the increased demands for personnel and equipment. This was arguably the most stressful area to patrol in the city, as there were literally hundreds of nightly confrontations with intoxicated and aggressive patrons. (During the summer of 1992, 16 police officers were assaulted.) The recovery of several automatic and semi-automatic weapons combined with significant public and political scrutiny to add further stress to the officers working this area.

The police previously reacted to each situation on an individual basis. The effort lacked coordination and consistency in its approach. It was a matter of fighting fires and continuously dealing with situations after they had occurred. A beat officer program was commenced in an attempt to deal with the increase in crime, however this was allowed to lapse. The police officers that worked the zone in which the Avenue was contained, responded to calls for service on an as needed basis. When attending the Avenue, it was a most inhospitable locale with limited support from bar staff and the public. The police reacted to the environment instead of solving problems and controlling the environment.

The various departments of the City of Calgary and the Province of Alberta who were forced to deal with issues (i.e., planning, licensing, liquor and gambling to name a few) often operated in isolation and made unilateral decisions which frequently had an impact on the work another area was attempting to address. As a result, many initiatives were less than effective.

ANALYSIS

Information concerning the identification of problems and the subsequent initiatives, which were later used to impact them, came from four main sources:

- An in-depth analysis of crime trends in the zone identified serious problems with street robberies, auto thefts, theft and damage to vehicles and drunken

disturbances as comprising the primary crime problems.

- A town hall meeting with area residents to get input regarding their perception of the problems revealed concerns about all night noise from loud patrons, squealing tires and blaring music, constant garbage on Avenue and surrounding residential area and property damage to homes, vehicles and businesses.
- Input from the businesses on Electric Avenue who tended to point fingers at each other and the police for not controlling the violence and property damage caused by rowdy, drunken patrons leaving the bars.
- The 22 police officers that worked the zone associated the following concerns with working Electric Avenue:
 - A lack of cooperation among businesses, bad media coverage of efforts to control disturbances
 - Escalating violence, assaults on police officers, lack of a continuous beat team on the Avenue.
 - Ineffective equipment, a lack of clear direction, and support from the Service and no operational plans to deal effectively with large-scale spontaneous demonstrations.

All four of these areas provided invaluable information identifying what the problems were and all assisted in articulating a series of responses which when used together, had an overlapping positive effect. This approach had the greatest impact on the crime, with the police not only acting as “enforcers” of the law but more importantly, coordinating the efforts of others based on a model of interactive policing in which those affected by the problem have a say in how it is addressed.

The primary function of the zone commander was to ensure his personnel were trained in problem solving, provide them with clearly defined expectations through strong leadership, facilitate police initiatives and remove barriers. This was accomplished with by coordinating the efforts of people from the four sources mentioned above.

RESPONSE

Obtaining information about the problem was not a difficult task, however gaining cooperation from other city departments and provincial agencies was. The 11th Avenue Business Association was formed at the outset. This included representatives from all the bars and area businesses. The local ward alderman was also asked to participate on several occasions as many of the problems identified fell into one of three areas requiring improvements. These were:

- Architectural
- Regulatory
- Operational

As a result, the zone commander went directly to the Chief of Police who requested that the mayor call a meeting of some 26 departments and agencies including the Police Commission. A task force was created to assist in bridging the communications gap. This group was tasked with developing strategies to address the three areas previously identified.

The Task Force was comprised of representatives from the Police, Planning, Licensing, Fire, Law Department, the Provincial Liquor Board (ALCB) and the bars on Electric Avenue. This group was directly responsible for drafting legislation, which caused infrastructure spending in excess of \$800,000 to be spent on redesigning the Avenue with a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CEPTED) concept in mind. In addition, an Area Redevelopment Plan was drafted and passed by city council regulating any development in the Electric Avenue area (which was designated as an “entertainment district.”)

The goal of these efforts was to reduce the level of violent crime, noise, property damage and spontaneous celebrations on Electric Avenue. Communication and coordination of efforts was determined to be a key component in having a positive impact on this area.

More than reducing the seriousness of the incidents or reducing the number of incidents. There was a drive to coordinate responsibilities. The only way this could be achieved was by engaging the surrounding community in a partnership to identify and resolve problems. This was achieved through the formation of the 11th Avenue Business Association, the Mayor’s Task Force on Electric Avenue of which the Police Service took a leading role, and the parallel operational initiatives developed to facilitate the goals which were developed over the last three years.

An overlapping problem solving approach was used over three years to deal with multiple problems, which had developed over the previous live years. The 22 constables working the zone developed individual problem solving plans. The plans addressed a host of issues, some of which related to community identified problems, while others dealt exclusively with policing concerns. These plans required innovative thinking, at times a diplomatic approach and at other times, a more aggressive approach to ensure their implementation.

Throughout the three-year campaign, the Police Service, via the media, brought the Electric Avenue situation to the attention of the municipal and provincial governments and the citizens of Calgary. This campaign was geared towards drawing attention to the problems on Electric Avenue and forcing the community, politicians and businesses to sit up and take notice.

In 1991 the problems were first identified in the press. At that time, the violence on the Avenue was as much a reality as it was a precognition of future events. Drawing attention to this situation was a calculated gamble as the community then looked to the Police Service to solve the problems they had been so forthright in pointing out. It became the task of the Service to lead by

example and to empower the community, which included the businesses to become involved in the decision making processes; a process which would affect their livelihoods positively or negatively depending on the outcome of the initiatives.

The first order of business was for all of the zone members to be trained in problem solving. They then took direction from leaders who had not only a fundamental understanding, but also a significant commitment to problem solving. During the initial phase, the zone commander did an in-depth analysis of the most obvious problems and came out in the media identifying these while stating that the Police Service would be working with the community and local government to deal with a situation created by others but left to the police to respond to.

During the course of the next three years, virtually every city department became involved in addressing specific problems where they were able to lend their expertise. The Provincial Liquor Board, Gaming Commission, Federal Government Surtax Investigations Section (GST), the local businesses and bars, the Calgary Police Commission and local and provincial government officials were all enlisted to participate in this endeavour.

ASSESSMENT

The successes experienced on the Avenue have been realized by the following assessment:

- a substantial reduction in violent and property crime;
- a major architectural facelift, which assists in presenting an ongoing message to patrons of expressing respect for people and property;
- The establishment of a Coordinated Response Team (C.R.T.) whose mandate is to respond to multi-jurisdictional problems citywide; and
- A substantial reduction of weapons complaints, complaints against police officers and assaults on police officers.

Problem solving initiatives developed for Electric Avenue are being used in other areas of the city that are experiencing similar problems as those encountered on Electric Avenue.

The Police, the community, the politicians, the patrons, and government agencies have all learned a valuable lesson from the experiences of Electric Avenue. They have learned that a cooperative and proactive effort geared towards problem solving, is more effective and more efficient than a reactive approach to interacting with a man made environment.