Perceptions Of Crime

Does downtown have a crime problem?

It depends on your perspective.

There have been three muggings and/or robberies in downtown Lafayette since late August. The incidents probably wouldn’t have drawn much attention except that—unfortunately for those trying to promote downtown redevelopment—two of the three victims were writers for The Daily Advertiser.

Business Editor Jim Bradshaw was mugged, robbed and left on the sidewalk during the summer. Some teeth were knocked out, and he’ll show you the place where his nose was broken. In October, reporter Bill Decker, who had just moved to Lafayette, was robbed before he could get his new bank account open.

Both incidents were within a few blocks of the Advertiser office (and The Times building) and not too far from the police station. Neither incident took place late at night. Also within the last couple of months, a third person was mugged on Cypress Street.

Both Decker and Bradshaw wrote about the crimes against them. Bradshaw only this month after downtown supporters wrote a letter to the Advertiser taking issue with the paper’s reporting of the downtown crime.

Lafayette police say that in relative terms, downtown crime is minimal. Less than one-third of 1 percent of all the crime in the city occurs in the 10- to 12-block area including and surrounding where these three incidents took place, according to Cpl. Ned Ewing, spokesman for the department. Police Chief Gary Copes says less than 2 percent of Lafayette crime occurs in the downtown area. Certainly, downtown’s crime problem isn’t nearly as serious as in many other areas of the city.

That’s somewhat comforting, but still, the folks at the Advertiser and The Times have gotten downright fussy lately about walking to their cars after 5 p.m.

While a valid question can be raised about whether the Advertiser would have covered similar crimes quite so thoroughly if the victims didn’t work for the paper, the coverage has nonetheless focused attention on the issue of downtown crime. The perception that downtown isn’t safe after 5 p.m. and on weekends has probably held back its redevelopment.

One classic story from the mid-1980s is told by Sheriff Don Breaux, who was solicited by a drug dealer while sitting in his car at the stoplight in front of The Times. But downtown supporters and police have maintained that it’s safer than many other areas of the city.

All of which led to a meeting last week among people who work and run businesses downtown, Downtown Lafayette Unlimited representatives, city officials and Police Chief Gary Copes. And it was refreshing to see that no one was trying to pretend that there isn’t a problem.

In fact, Copes has taken several measures most people probably weren’t aware of. Two officers have been reassigned to foot patrol downtown, and their shifts are being changed to begin in late afternoon. The canine units have also been assigned to patrol downtown when they aren’t on another call. Some undercover officers have been poking around as well. The department is also working with the Lafayette Utilities System on improved lighting; Copes says he’s planning a night tour with LUS director Don Ouchley of various

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dark places.

He even offered police escorts to people working downtown who are feeling unsafe, but that’s contingent on what other calls the police have to answer and they could take a long time to respond. Calling the police to walk you to your car doesn’t seem like much of a solution.

Other downtown problems, Copes says, include groups of kids on bicycles riding around looking for trouble, some prostitution and homosexuals cruising the parking lot behind the Heymann property. Others noted by the dozen or so people attending the meeting are kids dropping glass bottles from the top of the city parking garage into the Home Savings & Loan parking lot, and kids skateboarding downtown on the weekends because, they say, there’s no traffic and they don’t have anywhere else to go.

Interestingly, Copes says police have found that drug activity is not a problem downtown, nor are the weekly Downtown Alive gatherings in the spring and fall. “We never have trouble at Downtown Alive,” he says.

While Copes is trying, he’s also contending with a serious manpower shortage, and that, coupled with the overall incidence of crime in the city, means downtown just isn’t going to get flooded with police. The department has 11 unfilled positions, and the next state police training academy class doesn’t begin until January. Copes says he tried to get the class moved up but was unsuccessful. A new officer also requires more in-house training after graduating from the academy. “You don’t just
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owners to make their own manpower decisions. Since it opened, the Heymann Oil Center has employed either private security officers or, more recently, contracted

give them a gun and badge and put them on the street,” Copes says.

The department also has lost two officers to military reserve duty because of the Iraq crisis. Of the 11 most recent academy graduates, four others might be called to duty. Legally, all those jobs must be held open while the reservists are serving their country, which means six positions might be vacant for up to a year.

“Yes, we have some problems downtown, but they’re nowhere near what they are in other areas, and I as a police chief have to make some manpower decisions based on that,” says Copes.

So, it’s time for downtown business