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Local XML

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East Siders to take crime beefs to streets

Neighbors to rally for more cops; city in budget crunch

BY MARA H. GOTTFRIED
Pioneer Press

One business owner kept saying they fear being robbed on the street.

A group of East Side residents plan to rally today.

"We have a loud and clear message to the city's organizers.

The rally comes as St. Paul's budget includes an 8.5 percent boost police overtime.

The department's sworn strength would become 581, the largest authorized in city history. But the expansion would fall short of the 100 new officers Coleman's predecessors wanted to add by 2010. The department had anticipated adding 25 officers to its ranks this year, but the number was cut to 12 because of the budget deficit.

"We're just sick and tired of being put on the back burner," said Linda Loeffler, a rally organizer who has lived and worked on the East Side for 22 years. "We're afraid. You can't go out at night and walk. You can't get a good night's sleep. We need to revive the East Side to what it once was."

Compared with a year ago, total crime in the police department's Eastern District has actually gone down a bit, recording an estimated half-percent drop from January to July compared with the same period in 2005. But total crime has increased nearly 16 percent compared with 2004.

Rally organizers said more officers on the street would help ease quality-of-life crimes, such as open-air drug dealing, loitering, vandalism and loud car stereos. During the first seven months of this year, Eastern District property crime is up an estimated 3 percent from the same period a year ago and 18 percent from 2004.

Loeffler said she and others understand police have to make responding to the most serious crime their priority, but there is a feeling that neighbors have to handle problems like harassment and property damage on their own.

Senior Cmdr. Bill Martinez, who heads the department's Eastern District, said responding to less-serious crime "sometimes takes longer than we'd like to."

There is an abundance of rental property on the East Side, and sometimes "absentee landlords" don't do thorough background checks on renters, Martinez said.

Police have tried initiatives on the East Side like Operation CARE (Comprehensive Area Reclamation Enterprise), and the increased police presence was "wonderful when it lasted," said Kathy Keiffer, a rally organizer and business owner on Railroad Island. But within a week after it ended, "crime exploded all over again," she said.

Now, instead of officers being confined to geographic boundaries as they were for Operation CARE, the department has received some additional money from the city for targeting "hot spots," Martinez said.

"It's kind of a nomadic group of officers — where things flare up, they go," he said.

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Brengman said a staff person from the mayor's office called her last week to find out what the rally's agenda was.

"He said, 'The mayor's doing all he can,' " Brengman said. "I said, 'baloney.' "

Tanika Nolan, who has lived in the neighborhood and run a business there for nearly 20 years, said the group doesn't want to "slam the city council or the mayor," but "we need change and we need it now."

Mara H. Gottfried covers St. Paul public safety. She can be reached at mgottfried@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5262.

If you go

What: East Side rally

When: Today, 10:30 a.m.

Where: Trinity Mission, 827 Magnolia Ave., St. Paul

