Private armed patrols sought in City Heights

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It has become almost too much, the daily dose of menacing vagrants, dopers and dealers, burglaries and spasms of violence that jolt the heart of City Heights along University Avenue.

Bob Mulz, owner of an electronics parts supply business on University Avenue in City Heights, knows this all too well.

"It's a situation of near complete hopelessness up here," he said. "It's getting harder and harder and harder to do business."

It is almost too much for the shop owners, too much for the merchants, too much even for the cops to handle. Mulz and other members of the City Heights Business Improvement Association know that they need a larger police presence.

They also know that -- even with Mayor Susan Golding's call for increasing the police force -- a few more officers won't be enough.

So the association is in the process of hiring its own police force.

Following the lead of merchants in downtown Oceanside, the University Avenue association has taken the first steps toward hiring a private security company to provide armed patrols for the stretch of the avenue from the Interstate 805 interchange east to 49th street, and one block north and south.

So far, four companies have submitted bids to provide the service, which would cost merchants from a low of $38 per month to a high of $76. The board of directors is set to vote on the proposal soon, and if it approves, the 700-member association would also decide which company to hire.

If approved, the patrol would become the first private armed security force of its kind in San Diego. The patrols would make citizen's arrests, if needed, and work with local police. A survey of association members showed that crime was their top concern, said Jim Merriken, president of the Business Improvement Association (BIA). "Basically, we have to answer those concerns," he said. "And this is the only way we know how to do it."

Police are receptive to the idea. "Our position on it is we would welcome any effort, no matter how it's presented -- public or private -- that will reduce crime," said San Diego Police Executive Assistant Chief Norm Stamper.
It's also an approach that will likely become more common in the coming years -- the result of a combination of rising crime and dwindling city revenues that don't allow for adequate police staffing.

"One of the things that understaffing has produced," said Stamper, "is a belief that the police can't protect us in a style to which we had become accustomed, or are not providing enough police on the streets to reduce the fear factor."

What the BIA wants to do sounds like some old-fashioned policing that police departments are struggling to provide, but in most cases can't. The association would have two guards walking a foot patrol through the neighborhood, getting to know merchants, watching out for trouble before it starts and answering the kinds of calls that understaffed police give low priority.

"The police themselves are unable to deal with crimes that are happening right now," said Dennis Presfield, owner of a plumbing business and vice president of the association. "We think just the presence of someone in uniform is going to deter crime."

City Heights had a violent-crime rate three times higher than the average last year, according to police figures. Mulz and others say reported crimes are just a fraction of the actual occurrences.

And though the Police Department has instituted some measures -- a neighborhood policing program, storefront offices -- it's still not enough, merchants say.

Some areas of the city, such as the Gaslamp District downtown, the Hillcrest area and North Park, have community patrols where residents walk streets and report crimes to police.

The Adams Avenue Business Association has been developing a volunteer community security patrol and is trying to expand it, said Scott Kessler, executive director of the group.

But armed foot patrols introduce another element into efforts to curtail crime -- one where neighborhoods take more responsibility in policing themselves.

"The city right now does not have the police officers, or the budget, to give us the working patrols that we need," Merriken said. Frustration is rising among merchants, and the security patrol is seen as not only an investment, but a necessity. Increased safety can help local business attract more potential customers, many of whom have been wary of shopping in the area.

"Either we let it degenerate into a vigilante situation out here," Mulz said, "or we have the best security force we can have."
Caption: 1 PIC
Seeking security: Jim Merriken, president of the City Heights Business Improvement Association, hopes private security patrols will help stem the tide of crime along University Avenue. (A-1:4; B-16:3; B-7:1) Union-Tribune / DANA FISHER
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