A community affair: Police station makes a difference to City Heights residents
San Diego Union-Tribune - Friday, June 2, 2006
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Before the Mid-City police station opened in a crime-ridden neighborhood on Landis Street, City Heights residents barely knew the officers sworn to protect them.

Patrol officers came from the San Diego Police Department's Eastern Division miles away on Aero Drive. City Heights, a community with some of the highest crime rates at the time, lacked what other neighborhoods had -- police who were engaged in the day-to-day activities of residents.

No more.

Ten years after the Mid-City Division opened just south of the intersections of Fairmount and University avenues, police have become a major part of the community, attending neighborhood meetings and working with youth.

Further, the station served as a catalyst of sorts for a revitalization in the area, which now includes a new shopping plaza, anchored by a supermarket, and a popular library nearby.

"It's really great having a police presence here," said Linda Pennington, a City Heights activist. "Just their presence is wonderful."

Although there has been about a 40 percent decrease in violent crime since the station opened, police and residents say there's still more to be done to transform City Heights fully into the safe and vibrant neighborhood they envision.

"We still have a long way to go," said Capt. Robert Kanaski, who oversees the Mid-City Division. "But, if you look at the journey, we've come a long way as an organization and a community."

The station opened in March 1996 near a park known for so much violence the cops never ventured there alone, said Kanaski, who at the time was a lieutenant and was assigned to the area.

From the start, officers tried to connect with a community that had become fearful and jaded from the crime that plagued their neighborhoods. They conducted several public meetings for residents to air their concerns.

"We just kept holding them and we saw more folks coming," Kanaski said. "These people out here wanted a change and needed a change."
The station was the first part of what was called the City Heights Urban Village project, a major revitalization of 6 1/2 blocks south of El Cajon Boulevard east of Interstate 15.

Planning for the $100 million-plus, public/private project started in 1994 and included a new school, library, recreation facilities, housing, adult education center and shopping plaza.

"We designed this village so each element coexisted with the other development," said William Jones, whose CityLink Investment Corp. developed the project.

The retail plaza, opened in 2001, offers dining establishments, a grocery store, coffee shop and other businesses. Across the street is the popular City Heights /Weingart Branch Library and playing fields.

Jones teamed with philanthropist Sol Price to make his vision -- transforming the neighborhood into a model for urban revitalization -- a reality. First, they met with the community to find out what residents wanted.

Residents told officials they wanted to feel safe, and that meant more cops on the street, said Jones, a former city councilman.

The police station was built on the site of a closed supermarket. It was designed to be a part of the community, not an isolated fortress.

The station features rooms for community groups to hold meetings, and an adjoining gym was built for officers and neighborhood children. The station also features a clock tower.

"There were urban design elements to help create a sense of space that was safe and inviting," Jones said.

City Councilwoman Toni Atkins, whose district includes part of City Heights, said the station has had the impact people expected.

"It's made a tremendous difference," said Atkins, who was a staff member in former Councilwoman Christine Kehoe's office when the station opened. "It fostered a better relationship between the police and the community."

When Kanaski returned to the station two years ago as its captain, he found the community had changed. When the station opened, he said, there were a few active groups of residents.

"Now, just about every community in Mid-City has a community group," Kanaski said.

Police often show up at community meetings to give updates or listen to concerns.
Kanaski has been known to drop by meetings and appear at community events.

"They don't ask for much," he said of residents. "They just want to be safe."

The Mid-City station has 126 patrol officers. It serves a 15.7-square-mile area, one of the county's most culturally diverse populations with about 157,316 people.

Over the years, City Heights has become a haven for refugees where Vietnamese, Central Americans and East Africans have called home.

The large number of immigrants has made the community's Multi-Cultural storefront, farther east on University Avenue, an important tool in public outreach, Kanaski said. Community relations officers stationed there can bridge the cultural gaps between the police and a community that speaks several languages.

Rebecca Bair-Schwartz, who serves as president of the City Heights Town Council and Swan Canyon Association, said the relationship between police and residents has much improved over the last several years. But, she said, she wished there were more officers.

"We just don't have enough," she said.

Kanaski said he has fewer officers than he did 10 years ago. But the decrease in crime is a sign that the department is making progress.

In 1996, Kanaski said, there were 17 homicides in the area that has a population comparable to Oceanside's. Last year, there were seven.

The number of aggravated assaults in that period dropped from 1,396 to 892, Kanaski said.

Now, he said, the police want to be more active in preventing crime. The department is considering putting surveillance cameras on El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue.

Price Charities recently gave the department $5,000 for a pilot camera program at the City Heights Recreation Center.

For one resident who has lived in City Heights for 17 years, the police's efforts are paying off.

"That feeling that there was total lawlessness is gone," said Theresa Quiroz.
Caption: 3 PICS 1 MAP
1. The Multi-Cultural storefront in City Heights is a popular meeting place and helps officers bridge cultural gaps. Abdiweli Heibeh, community relations officer for the San Diego Police Department, spoke to an East African youth group. 2. The Mid-City station on Fairmount Avenue appeared nearly new in 1997. Since it opened 10 years ago, police have become part of the community. 3. Mid-City police station 4. A gymnasium adjoins the Mid-City police station, where a basketball coach, at left, coached his team through drills. Officers also use the gym. (Ed. R) 1. Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune 2,4. Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune 3. SOURCE: SanGIS, UNION-TRIBUNE
Edition: R,C
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-1
Index Terms: CITY; COST; CRIME; POLICE; STATISTICS.
Record Number: UTS1946600
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Full-text obtained via NewsBank