



Saint Mary Mother of God Catholic Church

Public Safety Meeting Summary Laura Wolk and Patrick Lally of the Parish Council

On October 30, 2020, Father DeRosa and St. Mary's parishioners Laura Wolk and Patrick Lally attended a community policing meeting held at 6th and I streets. The First District Metropolitan Police Department organized the meeting in response to the petition developed and circulated by St. Mary's calling for action to address rising crime in the eastern downtown neighborhoods, primarily Chinatown and the Mount Vernon Triangle.

Captain Jonathan Dorrrough of Police Service Area 101 (PSA), the First District sector in which St. Mary's is located, ran the meeting and was joined by his uniformed officers from the Chinatown and downtown precincts. In addition, several members from various city social service agencies; representatives from the local condo and apartment boards; the president of the Mount Vernon Triangle Community Improvement District, Kenyattah Robinson; and a few of the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners (ANCs), particularly ANC 2C Chairperson Kevin Wilsey and ANC 2C01 member Michael Shankle, were in attendance. About sixty area residents, including many from the Chinese community, came to express their concerns and find out more. The jurisdictional Ward 2 DC Councilmember, Brooke Pinto, did not come.

Captain Dorrrough provided a general overview of the state of criminal activity in Chinatown and the surrounding area. The news is mixed. While incidents of violent crime are noticeably down and have been going down for several years now, burglaries and auto thefts have risen. He attributes this largely to the pandemic. Burglaries are up due to the lack of people on the streets and the opportunity for auto theft has increased because drivers leaving their vehicles idling while making various deliveries.

More concerning, however, was the captain's explanation that police are not addressing quality of life issues, as they once did, such as loitering and smoking marijuana. This is due to a number of factors, including the current climate surrounding race relations, the lack of criminal prosecution even if arrests are made, and dwindling resources due largely to uniformed personnel being reallocated from their normal PSA assignments to cover the protest areas. Dorrrough stated that police efforts are now focused on drug distribution and the use of harder drugs when possible. He reminded attendees that loitering and homelessness are not crimes and – again as a result of the pandemic -- displacement and lack of shelter have increased with the shutdown of social services and other critical resources. He stressed the need for city and non-profit social services to step into the breach.

Numerous residents and community leaders voiced their concerns about public safety that they have witnessed in the community. From this and additional remarks by social services representatives, there was consensus that groups of individuals seem to be coming to the area from elsewhere to either hang out, look for drugs, or – if applicable – avail themselves of limited social services. From the dialogue emerged some tentative suggestions that may lead to more promising outcomes down the road. These are:

- Increasing social services earlier in the day to engage in outreach to substance and alcohol dependent individuals before it becomes too late.
- In the interim (social service providers normally get to Chinatown in the afternoon), social services agents provided information and phone numbers that people could call if they witnessed someone in distress warranting social services assistance, particularly earlier in the day.
- Enlarging the presence of uniformed personnel on the streets as a deterrent by increasing foot and bicycle patrols. While this is something that First District officers are supposed to do, Captain Dorrough promised an increased focus on getting uniformed personnel out of the squad car and onto the sidewalks.

Father DeRosa made a specific appeal to the local ANC commissioners and other political representatives to make a robust reopening city-provided social services a top priority and providing them with extra resources to compensate for areas that are not the police department's jurisdiction or responsibility.

Though we have some work ahead in St. Mary's neighborhood to undo the adverse effects that have especially arisen during the pandemic, and to work with the Metropolitan Police in augmenting quality of life matters they feel they are unable to address, this community policing meeting was an excellent start.

First, it was incredibly positive and rewarding to see how many concerned citizens from the local community turned up in such little time as a result of our petition. For 175 years, St. Mary's has been a dynamic presence in the downtown community, and this is just another way of how we can help make a difference. We have provided the impetus for a necessary discussion on important issues affecting our area and encouraged others to become more involved as well. Second, this meeting provided a needed forum for the community to inform the police about problems they did not know about, including incidents of squatters in abandoned properties slated for redevelopment. Finally, we got to know our ANC commissioners, the primary level of local government in Washington, and exchanged reliable contact information with them. Father DeRosa was also able to engage in positive conversation with some of the other community members as well, further strengthening St. Mary's beneficial network in the community.

All agreed to continue the dialogue about the problems we are experiencing and to work collaboratively on solutions. Some of our next steps will be to strengthen ties with our newly elected ANC commissioner as of November 3rd and to invite a small coalition of local representatives to meet with Ward 2 City Councilmember Pinto. St. Mary's downtown neighborhood has come a long way over the years, and we are working to ensure that it remains on a trajectory of good progress and revitalization as we forge ahead.