

City tries new tactics in running dirt-bike fight

Annie Linskey, Baltimore Sun, October 24, 2008

A swarm of dirt bikers terrorized Michele Rosenberg as she rode down McCulloh Street, ramming her car with such relentlessness that she and her husband drove directly to the Northwest police station, where a sergeant said there was little he could do.

Police say their options have been limited as they grapple with the nagging problem of dirt bikes in Baltimore.

It's too dangerous to chase them, they say. And while it is illegal to drive the vehicles in the city, there have been few ways to crack down on the young men who routinely ignore the rules, taunting law enforcement and threatening residents such as the Rosenbergs.

So city leaders are turning to new tactics. A law took effect last month that allows police to seize any unlocked dirt bike - in an alley, driveway, front yard or street. A court can then order the bikes forfeited, and they are later destroyed.

"The fact of the matter is that these dirt bikes drive people in neighborhoods nuts," Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III said. "We're not talking about filling jails full of dirt biker offenders. We'll seize the bike, and it is game over."

Stories of lawlessness jam e-mail inboxes of City Council members, who have struggled with the city's dirt-bike problem for at least a decade. Councilman William H. Cole IV recalls finding a website purporting to organize city rides. He skims YouTube for video clips of Baltimore riders showing off.

Councilwoman Belinda Conaway recalled a group repeatedly circling Lake Ashburton as if patrolling it.

The level of lawlessness can escalate. In April, a 19-year old man was sentenced to a 45 year prison term, with 10 suspended, for firing at city police officers who were trying to stop him from riding his dirt bike in the 1300 block of Pennsylvania Avenue.

"It is been an issue for so long that I remember talking to it about then-councilman Martin O'Malley," said Chris Muldowney, Vice President of Lauraville Improvement Association, referring to Maryland's governor, a city councilman from 1991 to 1999. "They've had little kids and dogs almost hit by dirt bikes, because that is the game I guess."

Muldowney says she no longer walks her small dogs in Herring Run Park in part because of the dirt bikers.

Occasionally, the police helicopter, Foxtrot, will follow bikers and radio patrol officer to tell them where they are. "We are literally keeping an eye on the person from the sky,"

said James H. Green, a police department attorney.

When police do corner bikers, the young men often flee on foot, leaving their machines behind. Police confiscate the bikes, but owners had been getting them back by claiming someone else had been the rider. The new law tries to address that problem.

At a hearing this month to raise awareness of the new rules, city councilwoman Sharon Green Middleton stressed that residents must tell police where dirt bikes are stored if the new seizure rules are to work. Some council members believe officers should use more aggressive techniques. "I think we need to have a policy where we cordon off the streets and stop them," said city Councilman Bernard "Jack" Young. "People are afraid of these guys because they think most of them are drug dealers."

Rosenberg, a longtime city resident, said she wasn't afraid at first as the dirt bikers popped wheelies and revved their engines near her one evening last July. She asked her husband to slow down the car so the group would pass.

Instead the bikers stayed with the couple's car and one rammed into it.

"The others thought that was kind of funny," Rosenberg said. The rest of the bikers joined in, bumping into the car over and over. Shaking, she locked the doors and windows. She called 911. "They continued banging into us," she said. "I am petrified by this time."

Such packs are a regular sight in the city.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, bikers either roamed alone or in groups of two or three. One young man buzzed through the grass at Druid Hill Park and then looped around the nearby neighborhoods with a woman seated on the back. Two others flew up Reisterstown Road - running a stop light. A few more turned up in the park near dusk, one showing off with a wheelie.

A 24-year old man who said his name was Tali Patterson invited a reporter to sit with him on the front porch on Reisterstown Road and gave a detailed description of how to do a wheelie. He favors a Bandchee 450 - a four-wheeler - but his is broken down. "It is a rush," he said explain why he rides. "Females love it." He estimated that a group of 70 would convene shortly in Druid Hill Park.

That seemed to be the case. Around dusk Tiffany Dukes, 21, stood near a car in Druid Hill Park with three girlfriends. They were decked out in short skirts, short shorts and flirting with the guys cruising by to impress them. "It's exciting," Dukes said when asked why she finds dirt bikers attractive. "It is fun and they are sexy as [expletive.]"

Across town in South Baltimore a man who identified himself as Lemon Crocket said he often rides with groups of up to 75 around West Baltimore. He said that some car and truck drivers aren't intimidated when surrounded by dirt bike packs - they laugh and take

pictures. He said he's never bumped into a car.

Some Baltimore residents view the bikers as impressive. Cranston D. Cosby, 57, who lives on Gwynns Falls Parkway a block away from Druid Hill Park, says he enjoys the view from his front porch as dozens ride by on Sundays.

"When I look at them I don't see them like everyone else," he said. "I see them as very talented, but too bold."

Young, the councilman, does have some sympathy for the riders. Last year he asked the city to look into creating a park for dirt bikers, though some in the police department oppose that idea. Such a place, police said, would only encourage more youths to ride on city streets - if only to get to the park.

The roving bikers caught the attention of Lotfy Nathan, a student at the Maryland Institute College of Art, who has spent the past 13 months filming a documentary that focuses on several groups of riders, ranging in age from 16 to 30. Almost all are black males, although women occasionally ride, he said.

"Upper-class white communities generally are the most fearful of them and regard them as criminals," Nathan said. "Then there are other communities that get a kick out of it."

Nathan has developed an appreciation of the dirt-bike culture, including why riders band together. When police turn up, he said, they can scatter, with too many to get caught.

Bikers he talks to are well aware that they shouldn't ride in the city, and know that police can't chase them.

"I do see this cat and mouse thing that goes on between them," Nathan said. "One is trying to get the better of the other."