

Parking ban is trade-off in drug fight

Ban on parking appears to help reduce trafficking but cuts businesses' sales as well

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Every day, Derek Kang used to chase 20 to 30 people he suspected of dealing drugs out of the vestibule of Sweet Sixteen, a women's clothing store he manages on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Now it's down to just one or two, he said, after Baltimore police began a new strategy to eradicate one of the city's largest open-air drug markets: Take away the parking.

Business has been down since late fall, when orange "No Stopping" bags first appeared on the meters lining four blocks of the West Baltimore commercial district, and Kang and other merchants along the strip have felt the impact on their bottom line. But Baltimore police officials said that calls for service are also down there and that they are monitoring the effects of the initiative to determine whether it might be applied elsewhere.

"It does seem to be having some effect there," said police spokesman Sterling Clifford. "We'll watch it, and the other district commanders will watch it."

Kang said the loss of some sales has been a price he's willing to pay. "If I have to choose the better of two evils, I would choose this," he said.

The city's strategy is an example of what is called "situational crime prevention" -- changing the environment to deter criminal activity, said Jean M. McGloin, a criminologist at the University of Maryland.

In the 1990s, for example, Los Angeles police launched "Operation Cul-de-Sac," installing barriers on streets in high-crime neighborhoods to create dead ends that complicate potential escape routes.

"It's much more difficult to do a drive-by if you find yourself having to do a K-turn," McGloin said, using the term for a broken U-turn. However, residents found it inconvenient as well.

"The problem with this program ... with every potential benefit, it's never 100 percent positive," she said. "The balance between public safety and convenience can change over time."

Pennsylvania Avenue once was Baltimore's premier entertainment destination for the African-American community. The Royal Theater and other clubs drew performers such as Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway and Miles Davis, as well as the Supremes.

But decades later, those marquees are long gone. The state and federal governments invested money in streetscaping and fixing up the Avenue Market, but the drug problem

persisted.

"We just had to do something so the community could enjoy our main street," said George Gilliam, former executive director of the Pennsylvania Avenue Redevelopment Collaborative.

Not long ago, the four blocks of Pennsylvania Avenue in the Upton neighborhood were crowded with people selling drugs or looking to get high, say police, merchants and community activists.

"It looked like a circus, with people calling out different kinds of drugs," said Richard Sussman, president of the Pennsylvania Avenue Merchants' Association. His family has owned Northwestern Loan & Pawnbrokers, in the 1700 block of Pennsylvania Ave., for nearly 90 years.

Although removing the parking has inconvenienced customers and store owners, the increased police presence has improved conditions, he said.

"If the police believe it's a necessary step in their arsenal to keep drug dealers away, it's worth the price for now," Sussman said, adding that he hopes the move is a short-term change with a long-term benefit.

Sussman acknowledged a concern about the financial impact. "Sometimes there's a worry that you can cure the disease and kill the patient," he said.

Deputy Maj. Avon Mackel of the Baltimore Police Department's Central District said eliminating parking has allowed officers to see both sides of the boulevard. Before January, he said, "you couldn't see the concrete there, there were so many people out there."

Now "it is phenomenal for me," Mackel said. "You can actually ride through Pennsylvania Avenue and actually see the sidewalk."

An additional 10 officers from the Police Department's public housing section patrol the strip on foot, also writing tickets, he said.

According to police records, the department received 15 percent fewer calls for service on those four blocks from February through April, compared with the same time last year. Narcotics reports declined by more than a third as well.

Councilman William H. Cole IV, who represents the community, said he's heard many compliments -- and very few complaints -- about the initiative.

The city has plenty of commercial districts where customers are not guaranteed a parking space in front of businesses, such as near Lexington or Cross Street markets, he said.

And customers can park in a metered lot next to the Avenue Market and on side streets.

"We're trying to make sure the avenue is strong," Cole said. "From a pedestrian standpoint, it's a much more welcoming place to walk."

Mackel said officials are creating temporary stopping passes for customers loading heavy packages or running in for quick transactions.

Taking the meters out of business has not had a major impact on city coffers.

The 50 or so one-hour meters, ordinarily in effect six days a week, cost 20 cents for an hour and would bring in a maximum of about \$500 a week.

"Meters are not there for revenue for the city but to generate turnover for economic development," said Peter Collier, deputy director of the Baltimore Parking Authority.

Parking meters can be taken out of operation temporarily for special events, such as a parade, or for construction. But Collier said that metered spaces have also been blocked off to create space to help disperse a crowd, such as near The Block at closing time.

On Pennsylvania Avenue, several business owners say they have lost sales because of the parking ban.

On a recent weekday, Chong Pak of Lucky Shop said she had made only \$1 as of 12:45 p.m. "We're just here for nothing," she said.

Regina Lewis at Record Connection said she tries to warn customers about the parking ban. "When they come in just to get a snowball, I ask them where they parked," she said.

And the dealers return when the police leave, Lewis said.

Some customers said they have been inconvenienced by the change.

Deidre Danois said she and a friend had to park across the street recently when they stopped on Pennsylvania Avenue to grab some breakfast.

"I bet you police don't go up to Roland Park and tell them they can't park on their street," said Danois, as she shopped at Sweet Sixteen.

But supporters said they appreciate being able to walk down the main street again.

Dealers "would hide behind the cars and sell their drugs. They would sit in their cars and sell their drugs," said resident David Hendricks. "This is one of the best moves they could have made."