

Seton Hill's frustration shines a light on drug wars

Peter Hermann, Baltimore Sun, December 18, 2008

If the battle between city residents and city drug dealers is a battle of wills, it appears the drug dealers are winning, or at least have city agencies so confused that they can't keep a single street illuminated in a neighborhood that abuts downtown and Mount Vernon.

The people who live in Seton Hill got a portable floodlight near Orchard Street and Pennsylvania Avenue to counter a drug market. The dealers who prefer to ply their trade in the dark broke the light by cutting the wires and bending the frame. The city fixed it. The dealers damaged it again. The city fixed it again. The dealers broke it, again.

Finally, the light disappeared.

Bryan Dunn of the Seton Hill Association asked why and was shocked at the response he received from the city, in an exchange of e-mails with a police sergeant and a police major.

The light "is not scheduled to be replaced because of the damage done to the two previous light towers at that location," Sgt. Charles Hess of the Central District wrote to Dunn last week. It's not Hess' fault, as his boss, Maj. John Bailey, explained in a follow-up e-mail to Dunn:

"Bryan, we are at the mercy of off street lighting as they are the ones who repair the lights and they refuse. Don't you think I would like to have a light on every corner. It was not until recently that after begging for the lights to be returned that we received this answer."

Unwilling or unable to figure out a way to keep a light shining without being vandalized, it appears the city simply gave up.

"My God, read it out loud, it's a joke," Dunn told me after forwarding me the e-mails. "The drug dealers say, 'Wow, the city is so broken that they put in a light and all we have to do is break it and they take it away.' We just gave the drug dealers a biscuit and said 'Good boy.' "

I tried to figure out who gave the impression the city had given up and got lost in a bureaucratic tangle of agencies, whose defensive representatives alternately denied that they refused to fix the light, said it was somebody's else's fault or was somebody's else's responsibility.

Public works referred me to the Transportation Department, which handles lighting. Turns out police own the light, transportation sets it up and hauls it away when it breaks and public works fixes it once it's in the shop. Police in the Central District say someone refused to make repairs because they were tired of seeing the light broken; public works

told me they would never refuse to fix something, and transportation told me, "The police told us they wanted to locate it someplace else."

And around and around we go.

In an interview last week, transportation spokeswoman Adrienne Barnes corrected the already confused record a few minutes later, telling me the floodlight has been repaired and will be returned to Orchard Street.

I hesitated to ask the next question: Will it be repaired so drug dealers can't cut the wires again?

"That's where public works comes in," Barnes answered.

At that point, I wanted to scream.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV told me that when the light was on Orchard Street and working, "the drug activity dispersed." Cole, who also got Dunn's string of e-mails, immediately called David E. Scott, the public works director. "It may not be his department, but he understands you can't throw up a white flag and say we give up" the councilman said.

Dunn said the light had been returned last night but was still dark. Public works spokesman Kurt Kocher said, "We've done everything possible" to protect the lights. He said dealers will continue to break them, "and will do it repeatedly."