

Pleasantville's return to community policing helps city's downtown business district

Vincent Jackson

PLEASANTVILLE — Ricardo Moran has worked for 10 of the last 15 years as a manager at Johnny D's Pizzeria & Restaurant on North Main Street.

During the previous decade, when employees wanted people considered nuisances to leave the premises, the troublemakers were in no hurry to move along because they knew it would take a while for the police to arrive.

That is no longer the case with the reinstatement of community policing in the downtown business district.

"Sometimes, you have a problem in the daytime. They (the police) act way faster. They come faster. They come with more officers," said Moran, 44, an Absecon resident. "The moment we say, 'if you don't go away, we will have to call the police on you,' they leave in a minute."

The return of the community relations bureau, which includes a unit specifically formed to bring more attention to the downtown business district, has helped improve the quality of life for the workers, patrons and people passing through the area.

During the 1990s and most of the 2000s, the city police had a community policing unit, but it was depleted due to attrition over time because of the economic crisis starting in 2008, said Chief Sean Riggan.

The community relations bureau returned in 2018, but it had to be paused in the spring and part of summer when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its height.

"The unit was successful back then, just like it is now," said Lt. Stacey Schlachter, who has been a city police officer for the past 21 years.

The unit restarted in 2018 with one full-time officer, one sergeant and with Schlachter in charge. Schlachter is still in charge, but now, she is joined by three full-time officers and four part timers.

The community relations bureau was restaffed by reassigning existing personnel from other department, who volunteered to be a part of the unit, said Schlachter and Riggan. In the future, the city will look to fill the vacancies that were caused by the creation of the community policing unit, Riggan said.

"Primarily, we do focus on Main Street on quality-of-life issues, public drinking, public intoxication. We also stay in contact with all our local businesses," said Schlachter, who added her officer also checks vacant buildings. "The unit itself has had a huge impact on the community. We have a great relationship with our community. We are heavily involved with all kinds of community events."

Community relations bureau officers also can be seen engaging on Wednesdays with the city elementary students who stop by the after-school homework program at the library to receive academic help from Stockton University students, Schlachter said.

The community relations bureau is a year-round bicycle and foot patrol, Schlachter said.

Officers are on bicycles or on foot unless there are thunderstorms, heavy rain, snow or severe ice, Schlachter said.

They can wear shorts and T-shirts when it is hot and have to pull out the long johns and turtleneck shirts or sweaters when it is cold, Schlachter said.

Attorney Jonathan E. Diego grew up in the city and graduated from its high school in 1985. Diego purchased the building that houses his law firm on South Main Street in October 2018.

Mayor Jesse L. Tweedle Sr. and Riggin both advised Diego that there would be foot or bicycle patrols in the business district. It took Diego 11 months to renovate the building to his liking. He opened for business during September last year.

“The mayor and the chief are as good as their word,” Diego said, adding that he sees officers walking up and down Main Street. “It has been a great experience for my practice.”

Schlachter said community patrols on foot or with a bicycle are desirable because of the way the business district is set up.

“When traveling east to west and north to south (in a patrol car), there is no ability to slow down,” Schlachter said. “This is more conducive to the Main Street area. The business owners are more apt to call the police department, if there is an issue.”

Tweedle was a member of the City Council from 2002 to 2007 when the city had the money for community policing. He was voted in as mayor in 2008 when the recession started.

He saw the community policing effort slowly disappear because the city could not afford it.

Tweedle always wanted to bring it back.

“One of my platforms was to make downtown an inviting place in the city of Pleasantville. ... It is something we worked on over the years,” said Tweedle, who added it was one of his passions. “It’s working. I’m extremely pleased.”

But there are two negative aspects to community policing, Schlachter said.

If officers are on bicycles or on foot and they are needed for an emergency, their response time will not be as fast compared to if they were riding around in a police car, Schlachter said.

Also, officers are more susceptible to their environment on a bicycle or on foot, Schlachter said. If a violent situation occurs, the officers are more exposed than if they were in an armored car, which could act as a shield, she said.

“I’m very strict that no one rides by themselves,” Schlachter said.

As more officers are in the downtown area more frequently, more cases have been created, so statistics would not show a decrease in crime, Riggin said, but anecdotally, he said heard that people believe that Main Street looks better.

Riggin said the community relations bureau is a game-changer in the city.

“It provides a level of flexibility to solve any number of community needs outside of law enforcement,” Riggin said. “It will pay dividends in the years to come.”