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Residents call Eastside safer

Neighbors say patrols have cut down on crime

BY SCOTT WARTMAN • SWARTMAN@NKY.COM • APRIL 5, 2010

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COVINGTON - Vegetables will grow and flowers will bloom this summer on a patch of gravel near the Jacob Price public housing complex in Covington.

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Produce and peaceful streets are replacing the drugs and violence in Covington's Eastside neighborhood, residents said.

They credit neighborhood watches and increased police presence for drops in crime.

"It is 1,000 percent better," said Jerry Avery, while spreading dirt and fertilizer where the community garden will go this spring. "People are more concerned about the neighborhood."

Avery was one of several residents who started the neighborhood watch about five years ago. He became very visible in the community, planting flowers and admonishing those who littered and loitered.

"This is our neighborhood," he said. "If you move in, you are welcome. But be aware that we are not afraid to call the police."

Violence was common in the neighborhood when social service agency OASIS - Offering Assistance, Subsistence, Information and Support - opened at the corner of Robbins and Greenup streets in 2004, said Bennie Doggett, an OASIS board member and president of the Eastside Neighborhood Association.

Shortly after opening its doors, OASIS' windows were shot out, Doggett said.

"Five youth have been killed on this corner, right there in front of that building," Doggett said standing outside of OASIS. "We had our seniors that could not even walk down the street because of gambling and drugs and all the things going on in the neighborhood."

But then the neighborhood group started watches and residents began confronting the criminals, she said.

The street corner in front of OASIS and Jacob Price most afternoons is now quiet, said Brenda



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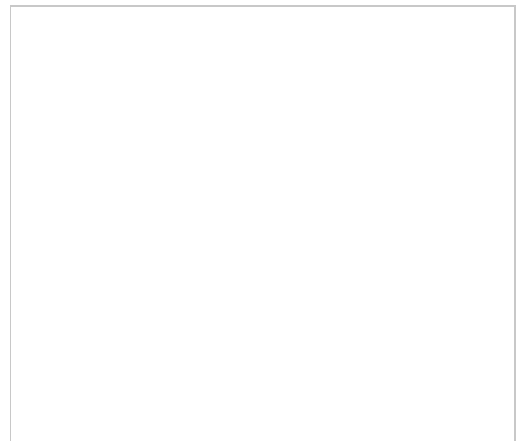
The Enquirer/ Tom Miller
Jerry Avery, a member of the Eastside Neighborhood Association, works on the community garden on the corner of 10th Street and Prospect Street in Covington.

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Ramsey, who has lived in Jacob Price since 2005. Ramsey has led neighborhood patrol efforts and isn't afraid to confront suspicious characters lingering around her home.

"This was filled with people lined up, so I started walking, telling people if you do wrong you will go down 'cause I have an officer I'm in touch with and he will come right down on the spot," Ramsey said.

Though the sun was out and the thermometer rose above 70 degrees Wednesday afternoon, only a handful of pedestrians were walking by the corner of Robbins and Greenup streets where Ramsey stood talking about how her neighborhood has improved.

"You can see difference," Ramsey said. "They used to hang on Greenup. There's none of that no more. It's just like a regular neighborhood."

Since Covington Police records aren't divided by neighborhood, how much crime has dropped in the Eastside neighborhood isn't known, said Police Chief Lee Russo. Most crimes citywide, however, have dropped for the past three years, Russo said. The Eastside has historically accounted for a bulk of the crimes, he said. Violent crimes of homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault went down city wide 10 percent from 2008 to 2009 and 52 percent compared to 2002, according to statistics provided by the police.

Police and residents said the last shooting in the Eastside neighborhood came in November 2008 when Rev. Donald Fairbanks Sr. was shot during a funeral at Ninth Street Baptist Church.

The police department in the past three years has increased its presence in the Eastside, Russo said. Annual drug sweeps in the Eastside neighborhood have yielded 20-40 arrests each of the past three years. Increased arrests in the neighborhood throughout the year also had an impact, Russo said.

"We were making arrests for disorderly conduct and minor crimes," Russo said. "We noticed the shootings dramatically reduced. If you help us deal with the small problems, we can prevent the big problems. The drunk on the corner doesn't get into that fight that will lead to an assault."

Residents said Russo and police officers have developed better rapport with the neighborhood that has led to tips. "We had a particular incident in 2007 where community members noticed Blood gang members from Cincinnati," Russo said. "They called us and we made six arrests. When that happened, people started to realize we meant what we said."

The increased optimism among Eastside residents comes at a time when significant changes loom on the neighborhood's horizon. The Jacob Price housing project is being torn down in favor of rehabbed homes in the neighborhood. So far, 57 of the 163 apartments have been demolished. The city awaits approval of a \$17 million Hope VI grant for the project. The city expects to learn if it gets the grant by mid-April.

Residents said the maze of buildings in the Jacob Price complex provided many alleys for criminals to hide. Many don't see the razing of Jacob Price as the reason for the drop in crime. Most of the residents in Jacob Price are relocating elsewhere in the same neighborhood, Doggett said.

It's the neighborhood watch and better police presence that has made the area safer, said resident Dorothy Allen. Allen walks the streets with others twice weekly. Three years ago, drug dealers, dog fights, dice games and loud music surrounded her home. Police pursuits of suspects had knocked down her gate multiple times. The past two years have been quiet, she said.

"It has tremendously improved," Allen said. "I couldn't go out and sit out on the porch three years ago...They didn't pay any attention to us until we got the block watch going. Now they move on when I come out on the porch."

Many in the neighborhood look forward to the future. Residents will plant flower beds from the 12th Street Bridge down prospect to Ninth Street to make that entrance into the city inviting, Avery said. Avery expects 50 people will take part in the community garden by Randolph Park. Some local restaurants said they would buy some of the produce from the garden, he said. Avery envisions flowers lining Prospect Street, which would make for a grand entrance into the neighborhood.

"It is a total community effort," Avery said. "It is all about bringing unity into our city."

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