

Portland police cruising crackdown angers activists

'NO CRUISING' SIGNS POSTED IN CITY'S EAST END

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in newsweekly correspondent

PORTLAND — Members of Portland's gay community say that Police Chief Michael Chitwood is again unfairly targeting gay men with his recent announcement that anti-cruising measures could soon be instituted at the shorefront East End park.

According to reports, members of the Portland police force have been tracking sexual activity by gay men, and arrests have been made at the non-residential area believed to be a popular area for gay men to seek anonymous sex.

However, say activists, this most recent crackdown by the Portland police is nothing more than blatant homophobia and entrapment.

"Gay men are almost always those who are targeted by this type of activity, and they are the ones that these types of ordinance are aimed at," said Sally Sutton, the director of the Maine Civil Liberties Union. "Where are the arrests of the teens having sex in their cars, or the women who might be driving around?"

The Eastern Promenade,



"NO CRUISING" sign in PORTLAND. (PHOTO: ANTHONY GIAMPETRUZZI)

known for its park and its scenic views of the Atlantic, may soon be the newest site of "No Cruising"

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signs. Such signs came after an ordinance was passed in Portland in 1996 as a result of the solicitation of sex, by both men and women, on Portland's residential Western Promenade. If caught, perpetrators face stiff penalties.

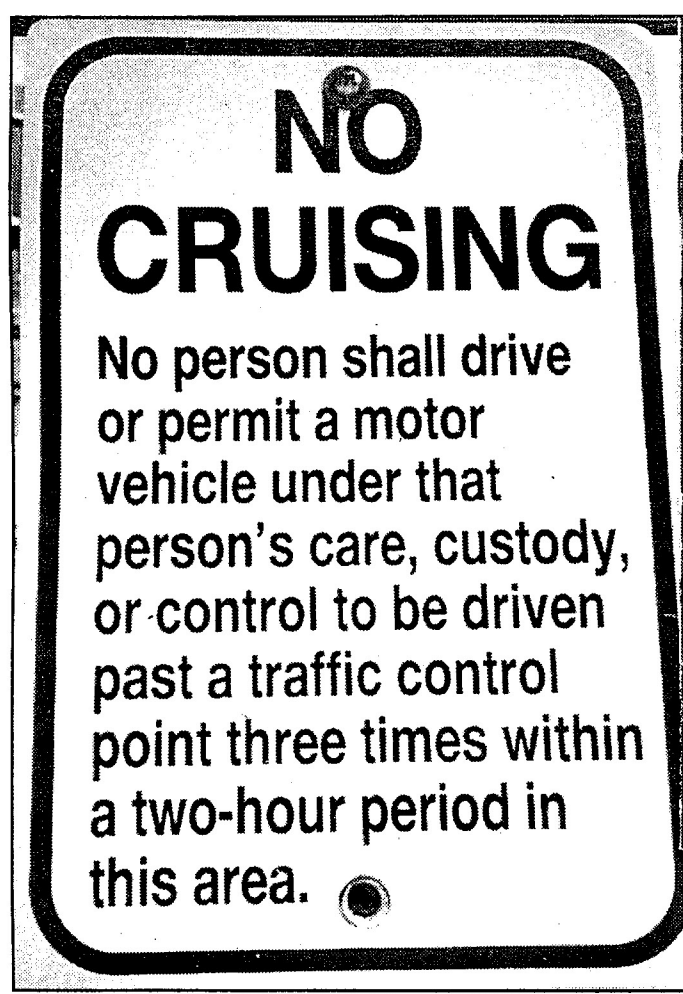
"We opposed the action when it was passed [in 1996] and we certainly oppose any expansion of it," said Sutton.

Portland police have reported that sexual activity among gay men has increased on the Eastern Promenade in the past few weeks. In fact, last week, a number of arrests were made by plain-clothed policeman — all those arrested were gay men.

"The times the officers have made arrests, [lewd behavior] was visible right where the general public could be or had been," Lieutenant Ted Ross told the Portland Press Herald.

But gay activists have unanswered questions regarding the arrests, including the time of the day that arrests were made and for what type of activity. Phone calls by in newsweekly to the Portland Police Department have gone unanswered.

However, one of the reasons given by the police department for the recent crackdown is the proximity of a grade school to the area.



"NO CRUISING" SIGN IN PORTLAND. (PHOTO: ANTHONY GIAMPETRUZZI)

"Because C.B. Circle [an area of the Eastern Promenade] is so close to Jack School, the teachers would tell kids, 'Don't talk to any men,'" said Peggy Johnson, who heads the public safety committee

of the Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Organization. "It was scary for the kids."

But activists are furious.

"What's happening?" asks David Garrity, president of the Maine Lesbian Gay Political Alliance. "This is the worst, most vicious, homophobic suggestion... What they are saying, all over again, is that gay men are pedophiles."

According to Garrity, this most recent announcement is indicative of reactionary measures traditionally taken by the Portland police.

In 1996, Portland began to crackdown on public sex on Portland's tony West End. A number of residents were complaining that individuals were incessantly cruising the area. Some residents claimed that gay men were having sex on their property.

After discussion and hours of testimony, the Portland City Council passed a no-cruising ordinance. Soon after, signs were posted throughout the West End which read: "NO CRUISING — No person shall drive or permit a motor vehicle under the person's care, custody, or control to be driven past a traffic control point three times within a two hour period in this area."

"At the time, everyone said that it had nothing to do with being gay," said Garrity, "but there

was definitely an undercurrent of disgust for the gay community. It was subtle and strong."

Many in the area, to this day, are disturbed by the implication of the ordinance which, incidentally, has never been challenged.

"On nights that there is street cleaning, I have to sometimes circle those blocks five or six times," says West End resident Colin Hoy, who sports a rainbow sticker on the rear of his car. "Logistically, I could receive a fine at any time."

But the East End is a different story. Non-residential and, among some in the community, well known as a cruising area, the East End is a very social place.

"How can you take action against people who haven't broken the law?" asks Garrity. "What about the 16-year-old kid, usually borrowing his dad's car, who knows this area as the only place to meet gay people?"

It is likely that signs will soon be posted on the East End. But, according to Sutton, it is also likely that the measure could be challenged.

"We would like to hear from anyone who has been arrested," said Sutton. "These laws are an intrusion to adults involved in consensual activity. The government cannot intrude in that."