

Western Prom 'cruisers' get police letter

● Civil libertarians say the effort is intrusive. But neighborhood residents, tired of gay sex on their streets, applaud it.

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Men who drive around Portland's Western Promenade late at night are getting a message in the mail from police: You are not welcome.

Cruising by men looking for male sex partners is on the rise again in the neighborhood, and police are combating it through the Postal Service.

Police Chief Michael Chitwood said Monday he is mailing letters to the registered owners of cars that have been spotted circling the Western Prom and nearby streets.

The letters are not specific about



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Portland police chief

the problem but make it clear that drivers who repeatedly cruise around the neighborhood late at night are not welcome.

Cruising has been a problem in the city for years and is on the rise again around the Western Prom, where it is particularly troublesome, Chitwood said. In response, plain-clothes police officers are working undercover to identify suspicious cars.

The officers write down the license-plate numbers of the cars and send letters to the registered owners to let them know when the vehicles have been seen in the neighborhood.

A similar effort two years ago curbed the anonymous gay sex in the otherwise genteel neighborhood, Chitwood said. About 50 letters were sent to registered car owners in late 1993, during which

residents helped spot suspicious cars.

“Once again, these guys are cruising and destroying the quality of life out there,” Chitwood said. “For a while you think everything is quiet, and then all of a sudden the neighborhood is up in arms.”

For about five years, the Western Promenade and its side streets have been a gathering place for homosexual men looking for casual sex. While civil libertarians say the police effort is intrusive, residents applaud it.

Residents say cruising has increased dramatically in recent weeks. Single men in cars flock to the area after dark and idle from street to street looking for sex partners, police said. Sometimes, the sex takes place in cars on the neighborhood streets.

“Sometimes it’s very active, with people going around and around all of the time,” said Lyle Voss, presi-

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dent of the Western Promenade Neighborhood Association. "That sort of thing is just not compatible with trying to have a safe and healthy environment to raise a family."

The letters from police don't mention cruising. In the letters, Chitwood writes that he hopes "that your vehicle was not seen spending an extended period of time in this neighborhood for reasons that impinge upon the safety and security of the residents."

Police mailed nine of the letters Monday - two to Biddeford, two to Gorham, and one each to residents of Old Orchard Beach, Augusta, Falmouth, Westbrook and Portland.

The problem is not so obvious during the summer, because the men walk into the wooded area along the Western Promenade and have sex there. Police Lt. Russell Gauvin said.

Now that it is cold, the men are using cars again, Gauvin said.

Sometimes men have sex in front of the graceful houses around the Western Promenade.

"One woman told me, 'What do I tell my 9-year-old daughter when she looks out the window and there are two guys involved in sex?'" Gauvin said.

Sally Sutton, executive director of the Maine Civil Liberties Union, said police should arrest people who break the law and leave everyone else alone. She said the letters could embarrass people who are not breaking the law when they drive around the area.

"Innocent people should not be badgered this way," Sutton said. "If a criminal act is observed, make an arrest. If not, leave people alone."

Western Prom residents, however, said they are pleased with the police response.

"I'm not prepared to say this letter is a tremendous offense to anyone's First Amendment rights," said City Councilor Orlando Delogu, a Storer Street resident and professor at the University of Maine Law School. "(But) if people have a legitimate reason to drive around and around - if they are a census taker, for instance - let them state it to police."

Text of letter sent by police

Portland police are sending the following letter to the owners of cars seen cruising in the West End at times when men typically seek other men for sex in the area:

"I am writing to ask for your support and understanding. The residential neighborhood surrounding the Western Promenade has become saturated with motor vehicles at night, the drivers of which cruise area streets for hours at a time. This activity leaves the neighbors with a feeling of being unsafe.

"On selected nights, plainclothes officers patrol these streets in an effort to identify those vehicles that constantly cruise the area of the Western Promenade with no apparent destination.

"On (DAY AND DATE), a (TYPE OF CAR), with license plate

(STATE AND NUMBER) was observed by officers at (TIME). Bureau of Motor Vehicle records indicate the vehicle is registered to you. The vehicle was seen repeatedly driving through the area of the Western Promenade. I hope that your vehicle was not seen spending an extended period of time in this neighborhood for reasons that impinge on the safety and security of residents.

"By bringing this matter to your attention, my hope is that you will take whatever steps are necessary to help the people of the Western Promenade recapture the tranquility of their neighborhood.

"Thank you again for your support and understanding."

Sincerely,

Michael J. Chitwood
Chief of Police

If the problem persists, Chitwood said, police may start videotaping cars driving around the neighborhood.

"They aren't coming down here to do banking, sell insurance or go to a restaurant at 2 a.m.," Chitwood said.