

# Block-watch revival afoot across area

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By Sherri Williams

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Fewer officers on the streets and worries that the down economy will drive up crime are fueling a renewed interest in neighborhood-driven block watches, central Ohio police say.

"They see what's going on in the community, they want to work to better protect their neighborhood," said Lt.

Donald Cade, supervisor of the Columbus Division of Police liaison officers who work directly with neighbors.

John Hart wants to start a block watch in his Edgewater subdivision on the Far West Side near Spindler Road before the summer. He and his neighbors fear that's when burglaries and other property crimes will increase.

"To me it starts with breaking in the cars, then the garage and then it gets to the next step of going in the house," said Hart, 45, who has lived in the neighborhood for seven years. "We feel that, with less police officers, it's going to be an issue."

The Spindler Road block watch is forming as police are encouraging neighbors to get involved in fighting crime, said Officer Tom Paulus, liaison officer for the 15th Precinct, which covers the West and Far West sides.

"The whole premise of block watches is for them to be the eyes and ears for police," Paulus said. "With the (police) shortage coming up, we want more people involved. The idea is to work together to reduce crime."

The 26 Columbus police recruits who were to be laid off have been hired by the city using federal stimulus money. However, no Columbus Police Training Academy class is planned, and many veteran officers are expected to retire this year.

Block watches can be effective when residents have the time to devote to observing and recording happenings in their neighborhood, Paulus said.

After a slight jump in property crimes, the Bexley Police Department is reviving its block watch to have neighbors note things when police aren't around, detective Dawn Overly said.

"We want the people at home during the day to keep their eyes and ears open," she said. "Watch their neighbors' homes and call us when they see something. No matter how minor, we encourage them to call us."

Central Ohio Crime Stoppers has been teaching block-watch members to note details when they witness crimes, its president, Kevin Miles, said. That includes vehicle descriptions, license-plate numbers, time and location of crimes, suspect descriptions and other identifying information.

On the Far East Side, the Tussing Block Watch is a coalition of six block-watch groups formed last spring.

The coalition of 450 residents, 16 businesses and Tussing Elementary School has worked to get rid of graffiti in Independence Park and note criminal activity in the neighborhood for police, said Summer Moynihan, coordinator of the group.

"It's a matter of including every resource you can, because the more people involved, the better," she said. "We've identified all the issues we were dealing with, and since doing so we have seen the crime drop."

On the Near East Side, merchants in the Long Street and Mount Vernon Avenue area are working to form a business block watch after a couple of shops were burglarized, said Officer Jason Jackson, liaison officer for the area's 6th Precinct.

To succeed, its members will have to communicate among themselves and be active participants, said Jackson, who also wants to revive the residents' block watch in the neighborhood.

"A lot of block watches start because of an event," he said. "Then, when everything has been taken care of, they fizzle out."

Residents of the Jefferson Woods neighborhood in northern Newark approached police about a block watch after a string of home invasions last fall. However, their interest waned after officers arrested a suspect, Newark Officer Doug Wells said.

To avoid a similar lack of motivation with the 110 households in the Hilliard Green block watch, founder Karen Ritchey wants to step up e-mail communication among residents.

"The biggest thing is people getting to know each other and be nosey," said Ritchey, 56, who moved in the neighborhood 11 years ago. "You can't have a safe neighborhood if people don't know each other."

Block watches can be effective when residents have the time to devote to them, a Columbus officer said.

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