

Crime in the Big City

While recent statistics have not been made public, every citizen of Williamsport and the surrounding county believes the city is experiencing an unprecedented crime wave. Neighborhoods feel unsafe, citizens are afraid, and the public is discouraged. An area that already has been hard hit by an economic recession lasting over 30 years is becoming even more unpalatable to potential new residents and industries.

No doubt the politicians, police and county officials are as frustrated and embarrassed as everyone else in the city. Is there an answer? What is the future of this grand old city?

Some say what is past is prologue, and the only way to understand Williamsport's problems and begin to address them is to look at other similar small rustbelt cities. Even looking at a large city like New York City can be instructive.

Prior to the "boom times" begun after World War II, places like Williamsport were bucolic centers of humming industry with proud and productive citizens turning out American made goods for Americans. That has all changed, thanks to an increasing body of large, mobile young citizens with an undisciplined past and a future that is anything but promising. Our industrial enterprises want to outsource our industry because it keeps wages low in the United States. Low wages are not, of course, the cause of crime, and neither is the political climate of greed where individual values and responsibility are lacking.

As a fourth generation New York City boy, I saw the rise, fall, and rise again of our nation's greatest city. New York became a center of crime, which has been vigorously addressed in the last 10 or 15 years. New York has now become a model of how to keep crime down while growing the local economy. How have New York City and a few other small rustbelt towns done it?

One answer is simple. New York City has expanded its police department, almost doubling it in the last 15 years, so that today the size of the New York City Police Department is approximately one-third larger than the entire population of the City of Williamsport. The other major change is a partnership between the police and local communities, which has made an enormous difference. None of this could have happened without a realization by New York officials that the Big Apple was in big trouble and

would not survive as an entity where people wanted to live unless dramatic action was taken.

Likewise, Williamsport needs to continue thinking about being creative and involving intracommunity discipline. Where does the crime happen in this city? What neighborhoods are most susceptible to crime? What are the demographics of the people who live in the crime-ridden portions of town? Where are those people from? How long have they lived in those communities? What is the connection of those crime-ridden portions of town with a more stable environment? Without knowing the answers to those questions, we can only use rhetoric but will have no solutions.

Community policing is not inexpensive. Unfortunately, the city is suffering from an administration in Washington which has created such a budget disaster that money is no longer available for our own infrastructure needs. The state has been told to get the job done of protecting Pennsylvania cities, but likewise is deprived of financial assistance. While state and local government has to balance their budgets, politicians in Washington just print new money and run up the tab.

The situation is gray, but not hopeless. There needs to be a strong, ongoing and consistent dialogue between the police, community leaders, the political establishment, and the business community. An aggressive group of leaders in each of those sectors ought to be appointed with specific goals as to what neighborhoods need more policing, where is that person power going to come from, who is going to supervise it, and what money is available. Without an interdisciplinary aggressive approach by people who live in the city and care about the city, the situation will continue to decline. This is not a situation where those of us who live and work in this city can stick our heads in the sand and wait for Washington or Harrisburg to save us. Nobody from either of those great governing centers are going to come running in on a white horse and save us from our own inaction.

It is great that some community leaders have expressed a positive energy about addressing crime on their own local streets. It is terrific that Tom Marino showed the decency and concern to appear at the event. It is not good enough to wait a month or two to involve other leaders, and it is not enough to give platitudinous speeches. A council on crime needs to be established like it was in New York City and other great metropolitan areas, and it needs to be empowered to act promptly to get the drug dealers and criminals out of the neighborhoods, off the streets, and where they belong.

For some in the political and business arena to say this is a problem of poverty, transient, or people of a color not their own will not solve the

problem. The criminal element hurts anyone, and anyone who cares about this city needs to be involved.

Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711
rieders@riederstravis.com