

Crime districts



Baton Rouge police officer Cpl. Darren Hunt talks with Wedgewood subdivision resident Chris Tremblay after giving Tremblay a flier listing crime-prevention tips. Hunt is one of three police officers who patrol the neighborhood for the Wedgewood Civic Association District.

Resident-funded political entities fight growth of criminal behavior in East Baton Rouge neighborhoods

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Louise Calloway has always felt safe in her Concord Estates home. Calloway moved to the subdivision 36 years ago, has never been robbed and her house has never been burglarized.

The only crime on her block occurred two years ago when an armed man walked into her neighbor's home demanding money.

"No one was hurt," she said. "Praise God."

Calloway attributes her sense of safety to two things: good neighbors and the efforts of the Concord Estates Crime Prevention District.

“There’s only so much law enforcement can do,” she said. “I think the district is necessary.”

Crime-prevention districts are political subdivisions of the state. They are designed to prevent crime using education, law enforcement, security patrols and environmental design, which can include improved lighting and maintenance of trees and shrubs.

The Louisiana Legislature must approve each district before it’s created. Residents of a district must vote on whether they want to be charged an annual property fee.

If voters approve the fee, a board of commissioners appointed by state and local elected officials, as well as civic and neighborhood associations, decides how the fees are spent and how a district is run.

There are four crime-prevention districts in East Baton Rouge Parish. Three have been approved by voters and are collecting money.

Those three are: Concord Estates Crime Prevention District, Wedgewood Civic Association District and South Burbank Crime Prevention and Development District.

Legislators approved Melrose Place Crime Prevention District this year, but the district election has yet to be scheduled.

Responses to the three districts that are up and running vary.

Some people say the districts provide an effective supplement to law enforcement, while others say the districts are ineffective and a waste of money.

Districts claim success

The Concord and Wedgewood crime-prevention districts exist to provide an increased law-enforcement presence in the neighborhoods the districts encompass.

Additional patrols were running in both neighborhoods before creation of the districts. But they were difficult to fund with dues from neighborhood associations, district commissioners said.

Fewer than half of Wedgewood subdivision’s 448 property owners were dues-paying members of the association before creation of the district in 2006, said Philip Mayeux, the district’s president.

The situation was the same in Concord Estates subdivision before the creation of the Concord Estates Crime Prevention District in 2004, said Harry Johnson, president of the district.

“We got tired of knocking on doors and asking people for money,” Johnson said. “That’s why we asked people if they would be interested in creating a crime-prevention district.”

More than 60 percent of voters living in Concord and Wedgewood crime-prevention districts voted in favor of paying an annual property fee.

Concord’s fee is \$25 per residence while Wedgewood’s fee is \$50 per residence. Wedgewood collects about \$22,000 a year, Concord about \$6,100.

So far, many Concord and Wedgewood residents are pleased with the districts and how their money is spent.

Marlene Vial, who has lived in Wedgewood subdivision for 20 years, said the Baton Rouge police officers patrolling her neighborhood are well worth her money.

“I appreciate what they are doing,” she said after talking to Cpl. Darren Hunt about a vacant house on her street. “Their presence makes me feel more safe.”

Scott Wilfong, a Wedgewood resident and district commissioner, said that, in addition to curbing crime, the officers’ presence has decreased the number of people running stop signs and speeding along the subdivision’s streets.

“I couldn’t be happier with the results of the district,” he said. “I think it’s going really well.”

Mayeux agreed.

The district has been “the greatest thing in the world” for Wedgewood, he said.

“It took the enforcement end away from us,” Mayeux said. “We are able to collect fees, increase patrols and do our part to keep crime down.”

Johnson said the Baton Rouge police officers working for the Concord Estates Crime Prevention District have made his neighborhood one of the safest in the city.

“I look at the crime statistics,” he said. “I know these patrols work.”

Calloway, a commissioner on the district’s board, said the additional presence of police officers act as a crime deterrent.

The officers do more than just patrol the neighborhood, she said. They get to know the residents, check on houses when people are out of town and talk to residents about their concerns.

“They know what they are doing,” Calloway said. “That’s why we started using them more than a decade ago.”

Trying to find their way

The response from people living and owning property in the South Burbank Crime Prevention and Development District isn’t as unified.

Although some people in the district say they are pleased with the additional patrols provided by two private security companies, many say they expect more for their money.

Other residents are so dissatisfied they want out of the district. They are trying to get legislation passed that would allow them do to so.

Hermitage subdivision resident Sammie Grimes is one of those residents. He said the district is ineffective because of its size, makeup and purpose.

“I have a problem with paying for something I’m not getting,” he said.

South Burbank is the largest district in the parish, encompassing both single-family and multifamily residences.

Unlike Concord and Wedgewood, South Burbank includes not one but several single-family subdivisions. The district also includes the Gardere Lane area, parts of which are plagued with crime, including murder, armed robbery and burglaries.

“It’s a very large district,” said Lt. Wilfred Williams, a security officer with JPS Security & Consulting, the company that patrols the district’s businesses and single-family homes. “It takes us 45 minutes to an hour to patrol our area thoroughly with one car.”

Max Fetty, owner and president of Guardpoint Security, said the district hired him to patrol the multifamily residences because his people specialize in high-crime, high-risk areas.

“It’s nothing to be out here and hear, ‘pow, pow, pow,’” he said.

Another difference between South Burbank and the other two district is its purpose. Besides extra security, fees can be used to educate district stakeholders on such things as crime prevention through environmental design. The fees also can pay for other crime-prevention programs, such as training for rental property managers.

South Burbank’s fee is \$100 per single-family home and \$25 per unit in a multifamily residence. The district collects about \$200,000 a year.

Karen Lee, a district commissioner and an 18-year resident of Hermitage, said she disagrees with South Burbank’s purpose because it allows revenues from the district to be dedicated to programs designed for multifamily housing.

“The interests of all residents and property owners should be reflected in the wording of the bill and statute for this tax district,” she said.

Tom Hanlon, a commissioner and multifamily residence property owner, helped write the legislation that created the district.

Hanlon said the district’s purpose is not one-sided. Any multifamily program the board implemented would benefit single-family residents as well, he said.

“Coupling patrols with voluntary crime-prevention programs is the best bang for your buck,” he said. “It’s worked in other cities and I don’t see why it wouldn’t work here.”

Disagreements among South Burbank’s commissioners prevented the board from meeting until June 2007, more than two years after the district’s inception in 2004, district records show.

The bickering also led to several commissioners resigning as well as requests for opinions from the Louisiana Attorney General’s Office and the Louisiana Board of Ethics, records show.

As a result, money collected by the district wasn’t put to use until about a year ago when the two security companies were hired to patrol the district’s neighborhoods.

The armed security officers are in their areas about 35 hours a week. And because of their limited powers to arrest someone, they stay in close contact with sheriff’s deputies.

“We are kind of like the first-responders,” Fetty said. “We handle the situation until the Sheriff’s Office can get there.”

Tracy Woods and Michelle Grant live in the district. They're glad the area has additional security, they said, but want to see more patrols.

"In this area, they need to be out here at all hours of the night and early morning," Woods said.

Grant said if crime doesn't go down, she's moving.

"I grew up in this area and don't want to leave," she said. "But I can't risk my safety by staying."

Voters make final decision

The future of East Baton Rouge Parish's three crime-prevention districts lies in the hands of voters in the districts.

Concord and South Burbank can collect fees for only four years before voters must renew them. Wedgewood can collect its fee for 10 years before going back to the polls.

Charles Ciaccio, president of Lakeview Crime Prevention District in New Orleans, said voters in his district have renewed the fee every four years since 1997.

Each time the fee has come up for a vote, Ciaccio said, more people have voted in favor of it.

"It's obvious residents are pleased with how it is working," he said. "The district has been tremendously successful."

Collecting about \$500,000 a year, Lakeview spends its money hiring New Orleans police officers to conduct extra patrols.

The officers patrol the single- and multifamily residence district seven days a week, 24 hours a day, Ciaccio said. As a result, crime in the district has declined 39 percent this year compared with the same period last year, he said.

Edward Shihadeh, an LSU sociology professor and criminologist, said trends in national, state and local crime make a difference in whether people buy into crime-prevention programs.

Crime is low in the United States now, Shihadeh said, but because of the distressed economy and people losing jobs, he expects it to rise.

John Roman, a researcher for the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C.,-based think tank dedicated to studying the nation's urban problems, agreed, and said communities should look at different ways to fight crime.

"With the economy the way it is, one of the first things to go is law enforcement," Roman said. "So attacking crime from several angles, including crime-prevention districts, is good."

Sgt. Don Kelly with the Baton Rouge Police Department, and East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff Sid Gautreaux said the additional patrols provided by crime-prevention districts have been helpful. But they assured residents that their neighborhoods will be protected with or without extra patrols.

"Any efforts in keeping the community safe is appreciated," Gautreaux said. "Regardless, the Sheriff's Office will continue to be diligent in serving and protecting the community."

Kelly said extra-duty patrols, in general, support existing patrols and benefit the entire city.

However, the Police Department is going to provide “every neighborhood in the city with protection,” he said, even if the extra-duty patrols are decreased. <END>