

Seattle City Council Public Safety & Education Committee

Tour of University Way NE – “The Ave”

June 24, 2010 2:00-3:30pm

2:00 pm - University Heights Community Center (5031 University Way NE)

- Aaron Hoard (U-District BIA) will give a brief overview of the District and challenges that merchants and residents are working to overcome.
- Background: There are two primary groups doing business & community development in the U-District - the University District Chamber of Commerce works on promotion, community affairs and special events like the annual Street Fair while the University District Business Improvement Area (BIA) is responsible for cleaning, beautification and security. Although the District has improved in recent years, it still faces serious challenges with drug dealing, aggressive panhandling and street disorder, robberies, assaults, noise and graffiti. This tour will be an opportunity for Councilmembers to talk directly with property and business owners about the difficulties they face. The District is looking for solutions – areas where the City can make an effort to improve things and areas where the District can partner with the City.

2:15pm - Lothlorien Building (4730 University Way NE)

- Long-time property owner Tom Fergusson will discuss the impact of nightclub noise on residential tenants. He will also discuss how public safety – both the reality and perception – has affected the retention of street level merchants in his building.
- Background: The U-District has faced significant problems with certain nightclubs and bars over the years. Rowdy/inebriated patrons of these establishments have caused excessive noise and vandalism after closing time. Several large windows along the Ave have been broken. No business owner has ever collected reimbursement from the bar owners who witness these crimes or from the culprits who commit them. In some instances, shootings and other violent behaviors have occurred after closing. This situation can make it difficult on apartment residents along the Ave – resulting in increased vacancy. How does the City balance the desire to have greater residential density in urban centers (like the U-District) while promoting a healthy nightlife? More broadly, the perception of safety has an effect on whether customers come to the U-District and the ability to retain street-level merchants – whose presence is also a key element to urban center plans. Tom has extensive experience with these issues having formerly owned the Wilsonian and Rivendell buildings and recently built the mixed-use Lothlorien Building (one of the first new buildings along the Ave in years).

2:30pm - Gargoyles Statuary (4550 University Way NE)

- Owner Gayle Nowicki will discuss her front-row view of drug dealing, fights and the impact of graffiti and vandalism on her business.
- Background: Drug dealing and street disorder have been chronic problems along the Ave for years. Some of the problem drug dealers who have been gone (jail?) are back again and if we don't get a handle on this problem now, there will be trouble this summer. These people aggressively solicit pedestrians to buy drugs, donate to questionable causes, or simply abuse them verbally. This creates an unpleasant atmosphere for customers and forces merchants to deal with the problems. Merchants' front windows bear the brunt of this questionable activity – with some being broken, etched by acid or scratched. It costs hundreds of dollars to repair these windows – a recurring problem that many small merchants cannot afford. Gayle sees many of these problems from her front window every day. Having been in the U-District since 1992, she is dedicated to improving the area and believes it deserves to be a safe and vibrant place.

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2:45pm - Pagliacci Pizza (4529 University Way NE)

- Manager Jason Cheung will discuss the history of loitering and drug dealing in front of his business.
- Background: The pedestrian bulb in front Pagliacci Pizza has long had problems with loitering and drug dealing. This activity often spreads north to the bus shelter – making it an unpleasant place to wait for the bus. We have been told that Seattle’s sit-lie law requires a “victim” to make an official complaint to SPD. People are reluctant to file a complaint – either because they don’t have the time or they are afraid of repercussions. So, it is difficult for police to get a handle on this problem. Jason has witnessed many of these issues over the years. The recent closing of Rite Aid paradoxically reduced loitering at this location. However, depending on what goes back into that space, we fear these problems could return.

2:45pm – University Bookstore (4326 University Way NE)

- Personnel Director Louise Little will discuss the impact that aggressive solicitation has on bookstore operations.
- Background: The area in front of University Bookstore is a popular place for aggressive solicitors. These people will pressure pedestrians to support charities & political causes, purchase merchandise, or simply give money. This aggressive behavior creates an unwelcome environment for shoppers in the U-District. The Bookstore often hears complaints about this behavior, but there is little they can do about it. This problem is not unique to the Bookstore – aggressive solicitors operate all along the Ave.

3:15pm – Bulldog News (4208 University Way NE)

- Owner Doug Campbell will discuss impact of stickers and graffiti on public property in the U-District. Doug can also discuss his work to fix pedestrian lighting in the area.
- Background: The BIA pays CleanScapes to clean garbage and graffiti from the Ave each day – essentially privatizing a former City service. However, there is a lot of public property that CleanScapes is not allowed to clean – street signals, street signs, pay stations, poles above six feet high, etc. These regularly attract graffiti and stickers; the City rarely cleans it off. CleanScapes is doing a good job staying on top of the areas it can, but areas where the City is responsible stand out as an eyesore. Similarly, the City has been slow to correct some difficulties with pedestrian lighting – an important feature along the Ave to make people feel safe. Doug has been in business on the Ave since 1983 and has seen the impact that poorly maintained public property has on the retail environment.

3:30pm – Russell Hall (1414 NE 42nd Street)

- Tyler Bauer, Program Manager at Street Youth Ministries, will discuss the coordinated efforts of local social service agencies aimed at meeting the needs of homeless and street involved youth in the area. Challenges will be discussed, as well as what has brought success. Formerly homeless youth will speak of their experience in the U-District.
- Background: Homeless and street involved youth have long congregated in the U-District. While the extent of their presence ebbs and wanes, it is a constant feature of the neighborhood. Some youth are victimized on the street, and some engage in criminal and other social disorder behavior. All are in need of services to get their lives on track.

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Tour Summary

- Aaron Hoard will summarize the tour – How can the U-District work with the City to improve safety along the Ave? How do we keep this discussion going?
- Background:
The U-District has worked on cleanliness and public safety for years – how can we get on top of these issues? We are working hard to keep things clean along the Ave – is it possible for the City to improve the cleanliness of public property? Are there things the BIA can take over from the City? These issues affect the perception of safety and health of the retail environment along the Ave. We want to keep crime from escalating in the U-District again – there has been a long cycle of intense criminal behavior followed by relatively safe periods (usually after SPD attention). Is there a way to reduce the “highs” in this cycle? There is also a perception that police presence is lacking in the U-District. Given this area’s high employment and residential population, are we getting adequate police service? Is the neighborhood-policing model a solution? If so, how do we move forward with neighborhood policing given the City’s budget problems? What is Council’s vision for dealing with this?
- Over the years, we have participated in safety walks, paid for off-duty officers, and served on advisory committees. Are there other areas where the BIA can partner with the City – either by providing money or people – to improve safety? The BIA has discussed giving SPD extra funding for cameras, cel phones, overtime, etc. to improve their effectiveness in the U-District. Are any of these ideas feasible?

Additional issues of concern in the U-District:

- Parking Taxes: The City’s recent parking tax increase makes the U-District more expensive for shoppers to visit. When compared with free parking offered at local malls (Northgate, U-Village, etc.), this places the U-District at a competitive disadvantage.
- Traffic Revisions: SDOT’s approach toward detouring traffic during construction is making it very difficult for visitors and residents to move around the U-District. In particular, a proposal to limit left-turns on 45th has made business owners worried. The community would like greater outreach and help with mitigation – such as directional/parking signs, review of compatibility with ADA requirements, and consideration of the neighborhood’s Pedestrian Master Plan.