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South Medford residents frustrated by city's lack of response to ongoing issues

A September shooting and a list of ongoing traffic, parking and residential issues have sparked a response from South Medford residents concerned about the safety and future of the neighborhood.

About 30 residents and a handful of city officials participated in a "Safety Walk" Oct. 17 organized by the group South Medford Residents Together (SMRTO).

During the three-hour evening walk, residents pointed out dimmed or downed light poles, loose trash, illegally parked vehicles, pedestrian hazards and other issues.

"It's really an eye-opener when you actually walk the street and you see the different things and you feel it," said City Councilor Michael Marks during the council's Oct. 21 meeting.

One of the first stops on the walk was the intersection of Harvard Street and Bradford Avenue, where a 25-year-old man was shot Sept. 9.

State Police joined the investigation in recent weeks after initial interviews with residents by Medford Police failed to produce any suspects.

"I think the residents just have such concern — there are small children in the area, there's elderly [people] in the area," said City Councilor Breanna Lungo-Koehn during a September council meeting. "And that's just something you don't want in your neighborhood."

Police Chief Leo A. Sacco Jr. and other Medford officials also took part in the walk, which South Medford resident Ann Fretts recommended after learning about a similar event organized by police in Boston's North End.

Following the Sept. 9 shooting, Sacco told councilors the city needs to improve lighting in South Medford and throughout the city.

"This city's awfully dark," Sacco said. "Harvard Street, Main Street, we need brighter lights. We really do. Lighting is the biggest crime prevention tool that's out there. If you go into a bright area, you're usually pretty reluctant to do something."

For participants like Marks, who lives in the city's Wellington area, the walk highlighted safety concerns he had only heard about previously, such as pedestrian safety issues in the business district at Harvard and Main streets.

"When we were crossing the street, some of us had to jump out of the way because there were cars coming up onto the sidewalk or backing out trying to get off the sidewalk," Marks said.

Another topic was the lack of a loading zone for businesses, which residents said leads to vehicles parking and even driving on sidewalks.

Yale Street resident Anita D'Antonio suggested the city move the MBTA bus stop south of the Harvard/Main intersection to the north side of Harvard Street to open space for a loading zone.

"I understand that you can't always get [deliveries] at the same time from a company; there has to be some flexibility," D'Antonio said during the Oct. 21 council meeting. "And if we could establish a loading zone where that bus stop [is], that may lend itself to solving the problem for us, or at least ameliorating it."

Fellow Yale Street resident Anthony D'Antonio said vehicles backing out of parking spaces along Main Street cannot see whether traffic is coming.

"When people are trying to back away from their spot, there are no mirrors where they can see," D'Antonio said. "It's a gamble. There's been a few fender benders. Thankfully, nobody's really gotten hurt."

As the walk shifted to the area near Columbus Park, SMRTO spokesperson Jim Silva said residents also pointed out several sofas that had been dumped in the park, which have since been removed by the city.

Silva said the event has led to other improvements, such as increased ticketing of vehicles parked illegally in the neighborhood's business district and on residential streets.

He added police have also increased patrols of the neighborhood.

"It's really a good way to get feedback for the community," said Silva, who also recommended police patrol the neighborhood on bicycles and on foot. "This is going to be something that the city really wants to work on in all areas. When you bring people together, they talk and hear what's happening. It doesn't make them feel isolated."

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State Police are now assisting Medford investigators with the Sept. 9 shooting on Harvard Street in South Medford. Wicked Local File Photo

Silva said SMRTO organized the event because many South Medford residents are fed up with the city's ignorance to their concerns about safety, parking and other issues.

The walk gave residents a chance to voice their frustrations directly to city officials.

"I heard from several residents that night that people were looking to move out of the community because they're disappointed with the lack of response from the city when they call on an issue," Marks said.

Although the Sept. 9 shooting signaled alarms for residents of the neighborhood, Silva said the discontent expressed to Marks is not new.

"You hear that from everybody who lives there for the most part," Silva said. "I think people feel overwhelmed by the fact that there's no response to the city. They're reactive, they're never proactive."

— For more information about SMRTO, go to www.smrto.org or call 781-350-5464.

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