

Neighborhood told to stay vigilant

By MICHAEL HINES

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Russ Hart, one of about 10 volunteer drivers who patrol the Heritage neighborhood, stands beside his vehicle. (Michael Hines/News-Mirror)



As disturbing as a neighborhood robbery was to Sue Cirelli about four months ago, the fact that she was never informed about it was almost as scary.

Cirelli joined about 20 others at Mansfield Bible Church on Tuesday to discuss crime concerns in the Heritage neighborhood located just east of Matlock Road. The organization has begun patrols of the area in an effort to stave off crime that reached worrisome levels last summer. Cirelli wondered why it was never brought to her attention that not long after her neighbor was robbed, a house on the other side of her was also hit.

"I should have been told that," she said. "Are people just not talking to each other?"

That kind of communication was at the heart of Tuesday's meeting. While criminal activity has dropped off in the winter months, residents shouldn't get too comfortable in Rob Mehlmann's eyes.

"It's really a slow time of year, crime-wise," he said before the meeting. "The thing I'm most concerned about is I hope the passion level is as high as in the summer."

The group formed about five years ago after partnership chair Greg Ajemian attended a crime watch meeting. Since then, he's helped coordinate information to nearly 30 block captains who then disseminate the data to the rest of the residents on 35 streets. A rash of low-level incidents hit in August, prompting a look into starting patrols. Mehlmann serves as one of two patrol coordinators.

"The purpose is to deter crime," he told the group. "The purpose is to be visible and to make the place as unattractive as possible to the subversive element."

So far, the patrol consists of 10 patrollers. The participants take a 20-minute orientation and then get set to patrol the neighborhood streets in hour-long blocks. They record activities in a log, which eventually is compiled into a list of various incidents and observations. So far, the biggest concern is how vulnerable residents make themselves.

"Mainly what we've found isn't crime or suspicious activities, but as a community, we're leaving ourselves open to crime" with open garage doors, bikes left in lawns and electronics clearly displayed in cars, Mehlmann said.

On one night, 36 garage doors had been left open, with most of them housing one or two cars.

Still, the crime watch approach seems to be having an effect. Mansfield community resource officer Curtis Phillip addressed the gathering Tuesday. He explained that from Sept. 1-Dec. 31, the area saw 11 burglaries, 19 suspicious person reports and six thefts.

"But you can't slack off," he cautioned.