

Neptune violence stirs community concerns

Thursday in the parking lot of Dragon Garden, a Chinese restaurant off Route 33 near Jumping Brook Road. The quiet lot and blue skies were a marked difference from the violence there two days earlier. Downey saw the flashing police lights outside of the eatery from his nearby apartment but didn't know what had happened.

Dragon Garden, a popular Chinese food restaurant in Jumping Brook Plaza which was robbed earlier this week, in Neptune, NJ Friday February 24, 2017. Police and officials in Neptune Township say there's been a spike recently in violent crime. (Photo: Tanya Breen)

Around 8:20 p.m. Tuesday, police said, a bandit in a ski mask and dark clothing robbed the restaurant, ordering a female cashier to hand over cash while threatening the staff with a revolver. The suspect is still at large.

The restaurant staff declined to speak with the Press about the holdup.

The robbery at Dragon Garden is part of what community residents, police and elected officials see as increasing crime in this middle-class community tucked between the ocean and Garden State Parkway.

"The crime in Neptune, it's been getting out of control," said Downey, 35, an owner of a local recording company. He said he spent time in prison for drug and gun charges but said he's reformed and tells young people there's a better way than a life of crime. "I talk to them about it, some of them don't want to listen," he said.

Tyshawn Downey said crime has gotten out of control in Neptune. (Photo: Austin Bogues, staff)

As crime in nearby Asbury Park has decreased, some residents have questioned whether violence has spilled over into Neptune. Asbury Park was once ground zero for gang violence and gunfire, [with 26 people injured by gunshots in 2012 and 25 people in 2013](#). Last year, there was only one fatal shooting in the city, according to Asbury Park police spokesman Michael Casey. Between 2015 and 2016 violent crime dropped in Asbury Park by about 3.5 percent, from 231 to 223 incidents.

Meanwhile, violent crime in Neptune Township increased by 2.6 percent from 2015 to 2016, according to New Jersey state police records. That increase is from 4 incidents, from 154 to 158. That's after a 14 percent jump in violent crime between 2014 and 2015, from 135 to 154 instances of violent crime.

Recent incidents in Neptune Township include:

Feb. 23 - Police responded to a report of gunshots on Squirrel Road around 7:15 p.m. An investigation revealed no shots were fired, but patrol officers and the Street Crimes Unit conducted a follow-up investigation that resulted in the recovery of a handgun and what they described as a large amount of marijuana. Five men were arrested and face gun and drug possession charges.

Feb. 4 - A man was shot in the chest near Myrtle and Stratford avenues and was taken to the hospital with injuries considered non-life threatening.

Nov. 14 - A man was shot along Drummond Avenue as authorities said he was riding in a car. His injuries were non-life threatening.

There have also been reports from residents of multiple shots fired in the Midtown area of the township since November, although not all have been corroborated by police.

According to the township website, Midtown is defined as bounded by Neptune Boulevard to the west, Corlies Avenue to the South, Asbury Avenue on the North and bordered with Memorial Drive and Asbury Park to its east. (Photo: Google)

Midtown is a small enclave bounded by Neptune Boulevard to the west, Corlies Avenue to the South, Asbury Avenue on the North and bordered with Memorial Drive and Asbury Park to its east.

Next door to Dragon Garden at Jumping Brook Laundromat, Peter Britz, the business co-owner, folded a stack of towels on Thursday afternoon in the back office. "I wonder whether gentrification in Asbury Park is pushing crime this way," Britz, 29, said. "It's a bigger problem than just the police can solve. It's disturbing to see a rise in crime in Neptune."

The recent wave of violence in Neptune has caused concern about the township's ability to deal with a spate of increased crime and prompted criticism of the all-Democrat Township Committee by Neptune Township Republican Organization Chairman Jim Granelli in an open letter to this Asbury Park Press and community this month.

"Enough is enough. This must stop for the safety of our residents and for the benefit of revitalizing Midtown. No wonder there isn't any desire by developers to spend money in the area. It isn't safe," Granelli said. "Sure, the Democrats talk a good game to patronize voters and get their votes, but they never do anything about solving the problem. Well friends, the buck lands on the Township Committee's desk. They are the ones in charge."

Granelli said he's gone door to door distributing flyers about crime in Neptune. Police contacted by the Press declined to confirm each incident listed on the flyer.

"I think we've tried to do our best, and we will have to continue trying to help get to the bottom of what's going on," said Township Committee member Kevin McMillan, a Democrat.

Adrienne Sanders, President of the Asbury Park/Neptune Chapter of the NAACP, said she's heard complaints from Neptune residents about crime increasing. She said that a more visible police presence in trouble spots throughout the community would be helpful.

Sanders said she believes Asbury Park has done a better job putting officers on foot-patrol to interact with the city's residents. But she also said she didn't think political parties were to blame for the situation in Neptune.

"I don't think that the issue has to do with Democrats or Republicans," Sanders said. "The the issue is just a matter of looking or analyzing what's going on and addressing the issue and doing a community perspective."

During the height of nationwide tensions involving the police and minorities last summer after a spate of officer-involved shootings, community members and cops locked arms for a series of prayer vigils in Neptune.

On Wednesday night, Earl Davis stood outside Macedonia Baptist Church, greeting parishioners as they walked in for a worship service. Davis, the head of the security ministry for the church, said poverty plays a role in the violence. "Crime is starting in Asbury, and it's moving to Neptune," he said.

The poverty rate in Neptune, a town of 27,800 is 10.6 percent according to Census estimates, slightly below the state average of 10.8 percent. Neptune is about 53 percent white, 37 percent black, 9.5 percent Hispanic and 2.2 percent Asian. The town has about 130 miles of town, county and state-maintained roadway.

"To me the key is jobs. If you give these young kids jobs, you give them a career you show them pride, that young man may leave that gun alone," Davis said.

'Where the problems are'

The police department said it was making stepped up efforts to address crime in the Midtown area.

"That section of town is where the problems are. Where the problems are, we put our people," said Neptune Police Captain Michael McGhee, referring to Midtown. He said there two street crime units that focus on Midtown. But McGhee said there was also crime in other parts of the town. "At the end of the day, we're appealing for the public's help when it comes to seeing something, saying something."

McGhee said the police department now has 79 officers on duty, more than its ever had before in the 8.18 square mile town. McGhee said the department does foot patrols in troubled spots, and also uses proactive policing measures, like pin-mapping to help identify crime patterns.

"Community and church leaders, local students and families have spoken very clearly: they will not allow the acts of a few individuals to destroy their neighborhoods," Mayor Michael Brantley said in a statement to the Press.

Peter Walkowski, owner of Rob&Pete Computer Geeks, says he feels safe in Neptune. (Photo: Austin Bagues, staff)

That sentiment was shared by Peter Walkowski, 36, who has operated Rob & Pete Computer Geeks store for the past six years in Neptune off Route 33. He said he wouldn't be intimidated by crime. "I've heard the stories, but we've never had any trouble here," Walkowski said. "It's safe here."