



MIDTOWN PONCE SECURITY ALLIANCE

Public Safety Report 01 / 2008

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PART I: THE JANUARY PUBLIC SAFETY MEETING

SAFETY MEETING

The January 2008 Midtown safety meeting was one of the best public meetings ever for the MPSA and the MNA. Colonel Wayne Mock of Midtown Blue, Major Chris Lindall and Lt. Foster of MARTA Police spoke to the Midtown community. Ahead of the meeting Lt. McGee of the Midtown Mini-precinct spoke to residents about issues on their mind. Peggy Denby moderated the meeting attended by 55 people. In addition to Midtowners, public officials, media representatives and other interested parties were present as well.

SPECIAL GUEST: COLONEL WAYNE MOCK

About Midtown Alliance and Midtown Blue

Colonel Mock serves Midtown Alliance as its *Public Safety Manager and Homeland Security Coordinator*. Midtown Alliance's service area is known as the Midtown Improvement District and covers the area running from Ralph McGill Boulevard to Pershing Point, between Juniper/Piedmont and the freeway. Midtown Alliance manages a range of community improvement initiatives in areas such as economic development, promotion of the Midtown Mile, environmental management, and public safety. The Midtown Alliance operates on a budget of \$5.2 million generated mostly by a special tax levied in the Midtown Improvement District.

Colonel Mock directs its \$2 million public safety component known as Midtown Blue which, according to its website, *is the 24/7 public safety force of off-duty police officers patrolling Midtown streets and sidewalks and augmenting Atlanta Police Department (APD) services for a safer environment*. Midtown Green also comes under Colonel Mock's purview. The functions of this environmental management program include graffiti, litter and street spam control, and sidewalk sweeping.

Midtown Blue employs 52 off-duty Atlanta Police officers, additional support personnel, and maintains a fleet of patrol vehicles. At least 2 officers, and sometimes up to 6, patrol the Midtown Improvement District at any given time. They average 14 arrests per week for a wide range of criminal offenses and city ordinance violations.

Midtown Blue also operates a network of 30 public surveillance cameras, with more on the way. Special support personnel monitor these cameras at the Midtown Blue command base for suspicious and criminal activity, and other impediments to public safety. These high-quality cameras can swivel 360° and can even zoom into license plates several hundred feet away in the rain day or night. This public surveillance camera network does not include the red light cameras operated by a contractor for City of Atlanta traffic enforcement.

Personal Safety – most likely places to be victimized by violent crime

Colonel Mock talked about a number of personal safety issues. He outlined the four places you are most like to become a victim of a violent crime, and they are not necessarily along the Oak-shaded streets of Midtown.

Criminals have our society, especially urban areas, under surveillance and generally look for the most vulnerable victim - like a wolf before a herd of sheep. Colonel Mock urged people to never go alone when going to places where you are mostly likely to be victimized by crime. Mock emphasized to always be aware of your surroundings anywhere you go.

#1 place to become a victim: Convenience stores - According to the National Association of Convenience Stores 88% of all Americans routinely frequently shop at convenience stores. Criminals know that these stores are patronized randomly by people in a hurry and therefore this fast-paced environment poses opportunities to find potentially weak victims. Store clerks often work alone, and criminals know that the right moment to make a move will come quickly. Because of the fast-paced nature of patronage tendencies the store clerks are often not aware of activity at the pumps.

Colonel Mock advised first and foremost never to get out of your car and enter a convenience store unless you can see the clerk from your car. If you find the store door open but cannot instantly locate the clerk LEAVE IMMEDIATELY AND CALL 911. While pumping gas and especially going inside to pay for gas ALWAYS LOCK YOUR CAR – criminals often walk car-to-car looking for things to steal. Also a criminal may enter and hide in your car and await your return to rob or even carjack you.

#2 Location to be victim of a crime: ATM's - This also includes ATM's in places like grocery and department stores like Kroger and Target. Mock pointed out that perpetrators watch for people lugging shopping bags and stopping at the ATM on the way out – and then follow them to their cars. Also women tend to leave their purses in the shopping cart – and wait until the victim steps away to look at some goods on the shelf - always carry them on your person at all times while shopping.

You should always have your key in your hand when returning to your car – a key makes a good weapon to slice an assailant's face if you are cornered. If a threatening or menacing person is too close for comfort a panic button becomes very handy. Even if you are not sure about somebody you can briefly trigger the car alarm and turn it right back off – this draws attention from others in the parking lot.

#3 location to be a victim of a crime: traffic – Road rage remains a serious problem, and has become more pronounced as a crime category in recent years. Because of suburban sprawl induced by regional planning failures commutes are becoming longer and longer. This generates increased frustration, and some individuals vent this frustration in a criminal manner. Because of isolation in a vehicle some people respond irrationally especially in their choice of whom to take it out on.

When faced with such a sociopathic driver never make eye contact, and simply let them pass. Do not flash lights or blow horns except as a last resort to draw attention to a possible accident. More tips for dealing with road rage can be found at <http://www.roadragers.com/road-rage-advice.htm>.

Colonel Mock stressed that alcohol plays a significant role in road rage incidents. Because drinking and driving is only a misdemeanor at most (unlike other countries that treat DUI comparably to a felony) drinking and driving runs rampant in America. This naturally compounds the road rage phenomenon.

As an aside a DUI can become very expensive. Attorney expenses, court fees, and fines can amount to \$10,000 in the first year alone. Car insurance premiums increase significantly, and the ensuing criminal record can complicate future employment and travel abroad for many years to come (research criminal inadmissibility to Canada, for example). An injury or fatality magnifies the consequences.

All of these factors also increase the likelihood that you will be involved in a traffic accident, and possibly even a traffic fatality or injury. The best rule of thumb is to drive defensively and responsively.

#4 location to be a victim of a crime: shopping malls - As with ATM's, it is best not to go alone. Always stay alert to your surroundings. Colonel Mock pointed out that white lights on remote car keys can compromise your peripheral vision – he recommends using colored lights on these devices.

Pepper spray

Colonel Mock spoke at length about the use of pepper spray.

First and foremost Colonel Mock urges people to get pepper spray and not mace. Mace can be wiped off fairly easily and is therefore much less effective than pepper spray. An effective pepper spray contains at least 5% oleoresin capsicum among the active ingredients. Colonel Mock specifically recommends a product called *Capstun* made by Zarc International (www.zarc.com).

Pepper spray needs to be shaken once per day to maintain an even mixture of ingredients – failing to do this could result in only water being sprayed if you are faced with the need to deploy the pepper spray.

Be sure to check expiration date when purchasing – there should be at least 2-3 years left. Once the product expiration dates passes, replace the pepper spray. Also, never leave the product in a hot or cold car. Extreme temperatures can cause the container to explode, thereby rendering the inside of your car unbearable. A pepper spray product should have a safety mechanism to prevent accidental discharge.

Pepper spray inflicts temporary blindness (30-45 minutes) on the person deployed on. Because pepper spray is oil-based it cannot be wiped off easily – in fact rubbing it makes the effects even more severe.

It goes without saying that pepper spray can be deployed only defensively in situations of real personal danger. Offensive use will result in a felony charge (aggravated assault). As much as safely possible warn menacing individuals to back off, showing the pepper spray as needed. As Colonel Mock put it, pepper spray is not an acceptable response to a mere insult or verbal threat itself. Deploy only if no other recourse is feasible, and if you have no other choice deploy liberally until you can command the situation enough to move yourself to safety. Try crossing the street or shifting your path to avert a situation.

We stress again that you should always be keenly aware of your surroundings at all times anywhere you go. If menacing a individual appears who could imminently assault you get the pepper spray ready to deploy at that point. If you have to deploy pepper spray aim directly at the face of the offending subject until you can safely get away from the individual. Do not assist the subject afterwards – leave him for paramedics and police to deal with.

Anyone assaulting or accosting you is committing a criminal offense, you have the right to defend yourself, but once you deploy pepper spray you must immediately report the incident to the police! Failure to do so can make you vulnerable to criminal accusations. Pepper spray does not require a permit to carry because it is not classified as a concealed weapon (as is the case with firearms, stun guns, and tasers). But laws do prohibit its possession in certain places – airports, government buildings, and court houses among them.

Pepper spray also works very well on bears, dogs, and other wild animals. Indoor use will leave lingering fumes and will necessitate an evacuation of the room or area afterwards.

If you are robbed at gunpoint give the assailant all demanded items, but fight with your life any demands to get into a car – you will not likely get out alive. As Colonel Mock pointed out, you can always replace a Mercedes and a stop a credit card, but your life and good health are irreplaceable.

Book tip

Colonel Mock recommends *Fixing Broken Windows* by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling (ISBN 0684837382). Before writing this book Kelling and Wilson wrote a ground-breaking essay called *Broken Windows* in a 1982 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. You can read the essay at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/_atlantic_monthly-broken_windows.pdf.

In a nutshell the broken windows theory postulates that small forms of disorder in a community, if left unchecked, can trigger a chain reaction leading to bigger disorder and eventually more serious crime patterns. The Broken Windows theory guides much of the core public safety strategy for both Midtown Blue and the MPSA.

ATLANTA POLICE MIDTOWN MINI-PRECINCT

Before the safety meeting Lt. McGee of the Midtown Mini-precinct discussed some issues mostly with residents of upper Myrtle Street. The Midtown Mini-precinct is a special unit of Atlanta Police Zone 5 focusing on quality-of-life issues such as panhandling, vagrancy, noise complaints, street prostitution, and other forms of public disorder.

The Midtown Mini-precinct alone made 59 arrests last month mostly for quality-of-life issues. In the same time period they received 730 calls for service, and conducted at least 20 roadblocks.

Most of these roadblocks took place in Midtown especially within the MPSA service area. Roadblocks are conducted to check for insurance, licenses, and active warrants. As a side effect roadblocks, or roadside safety checks as Lt. McGee likes to call them, also benefit the neighborhood by exhibiting police presence. Lt. McGee stressed that if you have your driver license and insurance papers handy you will be on your way again within 30 seconds.

Some residents expressed frustration about the apparent lack of response to 911 calls. Because of the extremely high volume of calls, situations must be prioritized effectively (see our special report on 911 calls at <http://www.midtownponce.org/news/info/911CALLS.pdf>). In some instances the police may dispatch a plain-clothes unit to more effectively locate and observe the subject, so their response may not be readily apparent.

MARTA POLICE UPDATE

Major Lindall and Lt. Foster of MARTA Police were on hand to give their update. They announced two new programs for Atlanta's citizens:

See Something? Say Something – the officers handed out a brochure called *See Something? Say Something* to those in attendance at the meeting. This guide to transit safety and security contains tips on topics like safety on their buses and trains, and in subway stations. This brochure encourages users of the MARTA system to remain alert and report suspicious activity and objects (especially abandoned packages and bags). It also gives preparation tips in case a transit evacuation ever becomes necessary.

An excerpt from this brochure about identifying and reporting suspicious activity:

Familiarize yourself with the following signs of suspicious activity and report people who are:

- In an unauthorized or restricted area
- Loitering, staring or watching employees and passengers
- Pacing, nervous or jumpy
- Abandoning items and quickly departing
- Acting in a disorderly manner or disturbing others
- Photographing equipment or secure areas
- Carrying a weapon or appearing to have a weapon
- Wearing clothing that is extremely inappropriate for the weather (e.g. heavy coat on a hot day)

Citizen Police Academy – Since 1999 MARTA Police has conducted its own Citizen Police Academy, very similar to that conducted by the Atlanta Police Department. More information available at http://www.itsmarta.com/police/citizens_academy.htm

PART II: GENERAL ISSUES

NEW BLOCK WATCH

On the evening of Friday, January 11th, about a dozen upper Myrtle residents held their first flashlight walk. They covered Myrtle Street above 8th, 9th Street over to our newest problem property (burned out building at 9th and Argonne), and a few walkers even walked the alley behind the west side of Myrtle. They posted their block watch flyer as they walked the area.

APD Officer Timothy Strickland escorted the walkers in a squad car. It was quite a sight to see - a dozen Midtowners walking to reclaim the street followed by the police officer with the blue lights in operation. Officer Strickland works for the Zone 5 Midtown Mini-Precinct, a unit focusing on quality-of-life issues such as panhandling, vagrancy, noise complaints, street prostitution, and other forms of public disorder.

The residents pointed out the burned-out building at 9th and Argonne, our newest problem property, to Officer Strickland. This house burned during the first week of July 2007, and has remained ever since an uninhabitable eyesore attracting urban camping and other forms of nuisance activity.

This house has been under the MPSA radar for quite some time, and we have been in touch with Code Enforcement in hopes that the condition of this building does not drag on for several years like previous problem properties in the service area. Now Officer Strickland will see to it that the Midtown Mini-precinct will watch the house more, but efforts continue to hold the property owner accountable for their negative impact.

In a recent *Eye on Midtown* we reported the special meeting for upper Myrtle Street residents, and this led to more proactive action on their part. This in turn helps the MPSA more effectively monitor and address neighborhood security and public order challenges. The upper Myrtle residents now have a diligent block watch with its own listserv. They plan to do more flashlight walks, and take other measures toward a desirable atmosphere for their block.

At the MPSA we are very excited about the passion and enthusiasm exhibited by the upper Myrtle residents in taking back their block and we would love to see this practice proliferate around the service area. Midtown's revitalization remains an ongoing process, and efforts like this take us all to the next level. A dynamic and complex nature shapes the overall Midtown experience including public safety issues. There is no silver bullet to deal with the multiple fronts we face. We have to approach neighborhood security issues with multiple approaches – patrols (both paid and volunteer), block watches, environmental design, collaboration efforts, and communications among them.

On the one hand the MPSA functions as an umbrella organization to coordinate the neighborhood response to safety issues, with the MPSA Patrol as its backbone. On the other hand proactive groups like this have to be largely self-propelled given that the MPSA has a monumental mission on its hands.

Groups like this not only enhance awareness of the public safety issues that necessitate the MPSA, but also fuel community spirit which ultimately makes Midtown what it is – a place to identify with and call home. .

We are planning a framework for a neighborhood watch program to more effectively and efficiently work with this and other groups expected to emerge in the coming months. For now we would like to stress that the upper Myrtle folks are really on to something...

PROWLER NABBED BY MPSA PATROL

On the morning of January 16th a member resident called the MPSA Patrol hotline to report a prowler. A suspicious person was going from property to property and snooping into people's homes. Sgt. Cooper was on duty for us at the time and called for back-up from APD mobile unit. Within minutes Sgt. Cooper and APD officers intercepted the subject.

Because a witness will be available to testify in court as needed, the malodorous suspect was immediately booked on prowling charges and transported to the Fulton County Jail. A jail records check at the Fulton Sheriff's website indicated that just this past October the subject, Ivey B., was booked and eventually sentenced for carrying a concealed weapon and had, at that time, an active warrant in Forrest Park (obviously resolved by now - no further details available).

Citizen participation lies at the core of neighborhood crime prevention. Without an observant citizen, this subject may very well have broken into someone's home. We will inquire about and monitor the case with the Fulton County Solicitor's office for court watch purposes. On behalf of the Midtown community this type of activity in our neighborhood is not tolerated.

DRUG-RELATED SHOOTING

Atlanta's first homicide happened right here in Midtown - a couple doors from the 3rd and Piedmont intersection. According to local media reports one person was killed, and another seriously injured. Police then found a marijuana grow room in the building. Several months ago residents on Myrtle told us about possible drug activity in that building - we watched it and reported it to the police. We now wonder if the prostitute gang in some way contributed to this drug activity, especially as lookouts - we have seen prostitutes going in and out of this building. .

More importantly, this raised a question on how residents can detect a "grow house" or crystal meth lab in their vicinity. We found two very interesting online resources:

Identifying a crystal meth lab

- <http://www.methpedia.org/methlabmaterials.php>

Identifying a marijuana grow house / room

- <http://www.homeheroes.com/?main=iaq&sub=marijuanaGrowHouses>
- <http://www.nrps.com/download/justthefacts/marijuana.pdf>

MPSA MAILBAG

Burned-out apartment building at Argonne and 9th - Perhaps some of you have noticed a particular burned out building on the corner of 9th and Argonne. I have personally been inside the building and thrown a few squatters out. Historically this situation is an ideal haven, if you will, for drug movement and use. I don't think it would take much research to find a direct correlation with increased street crime anytime [squatters occupy a building of this nature]

I have been in contact with a detective or two who have had the building under surveillance for suspected drug traffic.

This situation is way too close and convenient for an addict living on the streets. A short walk - a block or so down – you find plenty of potentially inhibited targets. Easy pickings if you think about it. And I have noted the increase in crime stories has taken place in a remarkably similar time frame as the noted occupation of squatters in this building, as well as the nature of the crimes.

NOW, for the sake of a "disclaimer" I have never noted an individual in particular leaving this building and committing such a crime. That is to say I have no proof of this.....but have seen numerous individuals coming and going from the building as well as a few "street ho's" looking for "work" or perhaps lingering to get a fix.....THIS IS BAD.

I live a few doors down and have children and have a very hard time with the state of that building. This is clearly not the sole source of criminals. In fact I have noticed on many occasions people lingering on the corners in cars while their co-conspirators commit crimes somewhere down the block.

In my humble opinion, when we address this problem we will undoubtedly see a dramatic decrease in street crime. Will it end all crime in the neighborhood? Of course not....but we cannot dismiss the fact that these types will typically go where it's convenient to continue living their lifestyle. If we keep things inconvenient for them they will find another place to hang out.

MPSA NOTE: The owner of this property was cited for code violations related to its condition and will appear in the Atlanta Municipal Court at 8:00am on this coming Friday (1/18), in Judge Jackson's court room (6th floor). We are hoping several Midtowners will be present for court watch purposes. Please contact us if you are available at that time.

Burglary - My house was broken into on the morning of January 8, between 8:30 and 10:30. I had gone to the dentist and returned to find drawers and doors opened throughout my house and the window in my back door smashed. The burglar took a laptop, a digital camera, and a black canvas shoulder bag with a red "Marimekko Finland" label on the front flap.

My neighbor saw someone knocking hard on my front door shortly after I left, probably checking to make certain that the house was empty.. My neighbor described the person as follows: Slender, early 20's, African-American male, light-skinned, close-cropped hair, 5'8" to 5'10",

wearing a backpack and carrying a cup of coffee in a cardboard container, decently dressed. My neighbor saw him later in the day at 8th and Grady.

I suspect that he will keep the bag for future burglaries, as it is ideal for holding the small electronic gadgets he can easily sell on the street. The police said that he was looking for cash in all the drawers he opened (there was no cash).

The police examined the house carefully and gave me suggestions on improving the security of my house. They warned me that such burglars sometimes return after a couple of weeks, knowing that the stolen items have likely been replaced by then. I suspect that more than one person was involved, with someone out front watching to warn the burglar if I came back.

I got the strong impression that the police are very aware of the limits of their power to help us. They emphasized the importance of neighbors watching out for each other. Our neighborhood has many unique features which make that difficult. My conversations with the police have left me with the feeling that protecting our neighborhood is for the most part a do-it-yourself project.

If someone comes to your door and asks if have any work they could do, this person is likely checking to see if anyone is home. [As much as possible videotape or take a picture of the person and send it to the MPASA]

Following this incident, I have been left with a variety of emotions. The main one is anger. In addition to paying high property taxes, it seems that I will have to pay a great deal more in order to feel safe in my home, as the police cannot protect me. This location is ideal for walking many places, but every time I go out lately, I am approached by vagrants asking for money. And why did the city take my money for a parking permit if they cannot enforce their own regulations?

Before the burglar broke into my house, he went into my basement, where he defecated and urinated on the wooden floor. He took a sweatshirt from the basement to wrap around the hammer which he had brought with him. He passed up other valuables, taking only the small electronics which I described. I share an enclosed front porch entry with my tenant. The robber could easily have entered her apartment, but did not, we think, because her small dog barked and growled.

[When we ask about the possible lookout] The idea that there might have been a lookout was speculation based on things the police said, something another neighbor on Myrtle had told me, and my own feeling that the burglar wanted to make certain that no one was home and could more easily do that with help. The police said that they are seeing a lot of this type of burglary and that they sometimes involve lookouts. A neighbor had told me some time ago that there were teams of young men casing houses on foot or on bicycles and communicating using cell phones. This neighbor has been highly involved in neighborhood safety issues and was not speculating. This burglar took some time in my house, carefully going through numerous cabinets, closets, and drawers, even opening small boxes and ceramic pieces. The search was neat and systematic and things were not thrown about or scattered. There was no sign of hurry. It would have been very easy for someone in the apartment parking lot next door to watch for the return of my car, since I park on a parking pad in my front yard.

Vagrancy - Just read the most recent Eye on Midtown dated 01/07/2008. I found the section on the Beltline walk most interesting, especially the part where vagrants have taken up house in the open garage area of City Hall East adjacent to the [defunct railroad track]. I find it most distressing that the Atlanta police cannot properly manage their own property and keep it secure from unwanted intrusion. What do common citizens hope to expect when it comes to home or neighborhood security if the police cannot even keep their own property secured. This whole vagrant thing is out of hand. Our neighbors across the street have relocated to another city and a

bum was found sleeping on the front porch yesterday. A neighbor emailed them to inform them when she saw it on her walk before work. When our former neighbors called APD (mind you, they are across the country), they were told nothing can be done unless someone is at the property witnessing the trespass. Vagrancy and the crime that is associated with it is diminishing the quality of life in Midtown. APD needs to step up and crack down on it and continue to do so until such time that that demographic is made to feel so unwelcome as to move on. Until that time, Midtown will never accomplish its' transformation into Atlanta's "Rodeo Drive" image regardless of how many condos, shops and restaurants move into the area.

MPSA Reply: You are right on! Three really big issues - severe levels of vagrancy, an insurgent drug area along Parkway Drive and Boulevard, and serious police shortage - will never be addressed adequately until we have a city-wide citizen uprising. Until the citizens throughout the city apply some drastic pressure, city council and city administration will not redirect funds to deal with those issues. As for running off the vagrants from someone's property - only the owner or agent can direct police to remove people from private property.

STAY SAFE! Please encourage your fellow Midtowners to join the MPSA!

- Your Neighbors at the Midtown Ponce Security Alliance

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