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Anti-violence crackdown

Security cameras, shuttle buses among ideas proposed at mayor's summit on downtown crime

By AMY PUGSLEY FRASER City Hall Reporter



Halifax Regional Police Chief Frank Beazley, Justice Minister Murray Scott and Halifax Mayor Peter Kelly attend a meeting at city hall on Thursday to deal with late-night crime in the downtown area. (Peter Parsons / Staff)

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Downtown Halifax will undergo a safety makeover starting as soon as this weekend as a result of a meeting Thursday on downtown violence.

Mayor Peter Kelly organized the afternoon session at city hall after a U.S. navy sailor was stabbed to death on Argyle Street early last Saturday morning. The mayor invited about a dozen stakeholders to council chambers, just a few blocks from where Petty Officer 1st Class Damon Crooks of Florida died.

Bar-hoppers could see surveillance cameras in place at "Pizza Corner," at Blowers and Grafton streets, as soon as this weekend. A violent assault took place there Oct. 30 at 4 a.m.

And in a few weeks' time, a slew of new police officers will be on the downtown beat.

"Right off the bat, I could put at least 16, for sure, right downtown and saturate the downtown area with foot patrols, 24-7," Chief Frank Beazley of Halifax Regional Police told reporters after the meeting.

It takes three months to train and hire new police officers but the chief said he could get feet on the street sooner by summoning displaced Haligonian officers who want to return home and through extra duty or special operations.

He said numerous calls about assaults and public intoxication originate from downtown, almost half of them after 2 a.m.

"But I don't want the community to think we're just policing downtown," the chief said.

"I've put new resources in Dartmouth and out in our western division in Clayton Park, Bedford."

In the short term, though, Chief Beazley said he could have security cameras up and running this

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PROPOSALS

Initiatives resulting from the mayor's meeting on downtown violence include:

- Surveillance cameras at Pizza Corner by next week
- Recruiting 20 new beat cops for the downtown area
- Reviewing bar closing hours (Alcohol and Gaming Authority)
- Considering a Good Night shuttle run to get people out of downtown more quickly after midnight (Metro Transit)
- Conducting a police safety audit of downtown to see if elements, like more lighting, need to be addressed

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

" Pain is real when you get other people to believe in it. If no one believes in it but you, your pain is madness or hysteria. "

Naomi Wolfe

weekend.

"It's a possibility," he said after the mayor's meeting. "I've got technical people that are working on it."

The chief said quality assurance officers who work at headquarters would watch monitors late at night and the recorded images would be checked after other crimes to look for clues.

"It's another tool that I don't have in my arsenal of tools right now," Chief Beazley said. "It's got to have some effect on some of the things that are going on.

"Having cameras in place will cause some people to second-guess their activities."

Chief Beazley said Halifax Regional Police have already spent about \$30,000 on video equipment and are still studying how best to use the technology.

People will know when police are using surveillance cameras, he said.

"The minute that we're ready to turn it on, you'll see a press release come out from our department," the chief said. "We want people to know they're there."

The mayor also talked about possible cost-sharing partnerships and tax breaks for businesses that put cameras inside and outside their establishments.

The public won't have a say on the installation of security cameras but people will soon get a chance to speak on other issues related to the downtown scene.

Mark Parent, the minister responsible for the Alcohol and Gaming Authority, said upcoming public consultations will gather feedback on everything from bar closing times to the use of metal detectors at the door.

"There's opportunities for people to contact us and to tell us of their concerns and ways that they think we should be handling this issue," Mr. Parent said.

As well, round-table sessions on safety will be held all over Halifax Regional Municipality in the coming weeks so residents will have a chance to voice their opinions, the mayor said.

"That's our opportunity to hear from all the stakeholders and to hear from all of council about their own districts," Mr. Kelly said.

Halifax might be able to learn a few things from Fredericton, where bar closing time used to be synonymous with assaults, property damage and mischief. The situation has greatly improved in the past year since more lighting, video surveillance and weekend beat cops were introduced, said the general manager of Downtown Fredericton Inc.

"All of it has helped to make it work a little better," Bruce McCormack said Thursday.

A "Good Night shuttle," a bus that runs from midnight to 3 a.m. taking bar patrons out of the downtown to two suburban areas, has really helped, he said.

"When you have two or three thousand people hanging around, usually around the 'gut wagons' — the hotdog carts and french fry carts — that's when things tend to get a little tense and the fights break out," Mr. McCormack said.

The bus fare is \$2 but students with a U-Pass or passengers with a monthly pass can ride for free, he said.

Coun. Dawn Sloane (Halifax Downtown), who brought up the idea of a Good Night shuttle at Thursday's meeting, said it would be a "fantastic" way to disperse the crowds in the wee hours.

"We do have a high population of (university) students who go out and it would make sense for us to get them back home quickly and safely," she said.

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With Dan Arsenault, crime reporter

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