ALP MEETS ON CRIME

The June meeting of Action Langley Park focused on crime, and joining the exploration were representatives of the police department, CSAFE, and the University of Maryland’s Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice – plus others. Thanks to all who helped to tackle this important problem.

Although official police data indicate that a comparison of criminal acts in Beat A4 (primarily the apartment house portion of Langley Park but excluding apartments east of Riggs Road) during January-May 2008 and 2007 show a decline, there clearly is too much crime and also too much fear of crime.

Maryland’s Professor Jean McGloin, one of our special guests, indicated that there’s no simple answer to a complex problem. Therefore, any city or neighborhood should launch as many programs as possible that work against crime (for instance, Neighborhood Watch and National Night Out). She also indicated that the root causes (for instance, broken homes, and poor education and housing) are important to deal with but also harder to change.

One needed attitudinal change is to create a sense of neighborhood ownership on the part of residents. If you think it’s yours, you take better care of it. The challenges working against this attitude are the high rental population and an uncertainty of one’s home nationality - both of these lead too many people to think that their stay in or around Langley Park may not be long, and therefore an extra effort as an owner seems less important.

The ALP discussion stressed the importance a good police-residents relationships. Residents must help to fight crime by reporting criminal acts and testifying in court. Alas, residents appear to be reticent to report or testify because of mixed feelings about the police plus a fear of retribution. There is also an overriding fear caused by the Immigration raids and deportations. One meeting participant referred to a “palpable fear” prevailing in the area.

Culture-crossing issues (including language) were raised. Despite police training, problems of culture arise because of the variety of cultures represented in Langley Park. For instance, some observers think that a bilingual Latino officer can relate well with a Latino resident, but that is not necessarily so given the variety of languages and other aspects of Latin culture in Langley Park. For instance, an officer from Ecuador might not understand everything said by a resident from rural El Salvador.

TOD FOR T-LC

Will the Future Be Displacement?

The planners and developers involved with the Takoma-Langley Crossroads (T-LC) sector plan are focusing on “transit oriented development” (TOD), which calls for density at and near transit stations. So if the Purple Line is to be built (that’s not definite yet), the University Blvd – New Hampshire Ave. crossroads should, the planners argue, have many high-rise buildings, some with offices, some for condos, and others as rental apartments. At the show-and-tell session in the Langley Park Community Center on 12 June, display boards were filled with large buildings that remind one of parts of Silver Spring and Bethesda.

Written by the planners: “The goal of the Takoma/Langley Crossroads Sector Plan is to produce a joint Bi-County plan that will enhance the unique character of this diverse multicultural community and implement both counties’ existing General Plan recommendations. The emphasis will be on promoting mixed-use, pedestrian– and transit– oriented development opportunities to support a proposed Purple Line transit station.”

On the sector plan web site is a photo of a lovely low-rise area. (See top photo.) But at the June meeting, many of the photos were of high rise buildings. (See lower photo.) And that’s clearly where the planning is headed.

There are competing interests, and alas the competition is not very even. The county and its developers want to have the high rise buildings (the tax base will increase, and to some eyes the area will be better looking*), but with such construction there surely will be displacement of those currently in affordable rent apartments (many of those living in affordable apartments cannot or do not vote—so perhaps their opinion is low-weighted).
SHORT TAKES

ED-SPEAK?
The Prince George's County's Board of Education has decided to use a special language, as this announcement from the web site indicates: “New Theory of Action Designed to Drive Performance Culture, Improve Student Achievement. The Prince George's County Board of Education has adopted a Theory of Action for change in Prince George’s County Public Schools, 'Managed Performance Empowerment,' Board Policy 0119, provides the framework to drive forward and align goals, strategic plans, policies, budget, administrative actions... and the Bridge to Excellence Master Plan. The new Theory of Action will transform the culture of the school system to one of high performance rather than compliance. As schools meet State and national student achievement standards, they will earn more autonomy to innovate and make decisions that they believe are in the best interest of their students.” Want to know more? Then wander over to http://www1.pgcps.org/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=51918.

EARLY CHILDHOOD ED
Reports from a long-term study of the consequences of a long-running early-childhood-education program for children of low-income families in Chicago indicate that it has many benefits. “For every dollar spent on children who attended an early childhood program, almost $10 is returned by age 25 in benefits to society (e.g., savings on remediation in school) or to the participant (e.g., higher earnings).

TUTORING = EDUCATION?
New research in Maryland and other states challenges the efficacy of tutoring children in struggling schools, as required by No Child Left Behind. Comparisons of tutored and non-tutored children reveal few differences in outcomes. Does that mean more tutoring is needed, or better tutoring, or what? Alas, no easy answers.

SLOW ECONOMY HURTS LATINOS
The latest economic slowdown has had a disproportionate impact on Latino workers. From an historic low in late 2006, the unemployment rate for Latinos rose sharply in 2007 and currently stands well above the rate for non-Latinos. Immigrant Hispanics, especially Mexican and recent arrivals, have been hurt the most by the slump in the construction industry. Weekly earnings for most groups of Latino workers also slipped backward last year. There are no signs Latino immigrants are leaving the U.S. labor market, but they now play a smaller role in the growth of the Latino workforce than in recent years. For the full report, go to http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=88

POLITICIANS FEAR IMMIGRATION
"The tricky politics of immigration, an issue once seen as a driving force of the 2008 election, have relegated it to a back but hot burner in the presidential campaign debate and para-

IZED CONGRESS on the topic. Both John McCain and Barack Obama support giving legal status to millions of illegal immigrants, a position that strategists see as crucial to winning over Hispanics. But Republican and Democratic candidates are also wary of alienating white conservatives and blacks who oppose granting legal status or benefits to people who broke the law to come to the United States. The searing rhetoric from opponents who brand that idea as ‘amnesty’ has made the topic virtually untouchable, according to strategists and lawmakers.” (AP, 8 June 2008)

DO IMMIGRANTS FEAR POLICE?
“The 27-year-old daughter of a Salvadoran shopkeeper slain last month in Silver Spring pleaded ... for the public’s help solving the case, stressing that potential witnesses shouldn’t fear speaking to the police. Jenny Villatoro, whose father was shot in an attempted robbery, emphasized that Montgomery County police do not ask about the immigration status of witnesses or victims. … Police in Montgomery and elsewhere have expressed concern that cracking down on illegal immigration might lead to a reluctance among potential witnesses to cooperate with police. ... After the news conference, Capt. Patricia Walker... said, 'What’s important for us is we build a sense of trust, a sense of communication, so that when something happens to your community or to your family ... you trust us enough to know that your immigration status isn’t going to come into play.’”

Of course, many immigrants fear the police. First, some immigrants come from countries where the police are evil, sometimes kidnapping a family member or raping a young woman. Thus they are socialized to be very cautious. Second, the police in many parts of the USA are acting on behalf of Immigration. In our metro area, examples are often in the news. In consequence, police officers who want to solve crimes rather than disrupt lives must be extraordinarily imaginative in closing the cultural and power gap. And third, there have been instances of police brutality in the county and even in the county (rarely, thank goodness).

SHOULD IMMIGRANTS FEAR TEENS?
The news that in May four Prince George’s County teenagers (two boys, two girls) brutally hit and killed a 56-year-old African immigrant from Guinea, leading to his death, might be an isolated incident of brutality. Let’s hope it’s no more than that. But the anti-immigrant rhetoric that fills the airwaves surely is not helpful in enhancing peace and humanity. Neither is the brutality in electronic games and films. The Washington Post (11 June 2008, pp. f1) quoted Delegate Doyle Niemann: “It’s really a comment in some ways on the disintegration of values in our society. … We’re going to have to take a serious look at the whole culture we have, a popular media that has glorified this kind of brutality. We’re reaping what we’ve sowed.” Well said, Doyle.

JUVENILE (IN)JUSTICE?
A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation indicates that Black and Latino youth are punished more harshly than are White young people. The lockups of youth for minor offenses (often the confinement is in adult prisons) may generate more violence and criminality, and therefore the lock-em-up tenden-

“Short Takes” continued on page 3
Police officer Bernard Snowden, a guest at the meeting, noted that the officer who responds to a call may not be fluent in Spanish or another language of the caller. There is a language line available, although he indicated that sometimes the bilingual child is used for interpretation. Several participants worried about the uncomfortable situation this might create. (For doctor’s visits, children are sometimes used to interpret. This has been found to be an error-filled practice.)

The importance of “defensible space” was stressed. There is evidence that a well-lighted area with good sight-lines reduces crime. For instance, the crime near Tick Tock liquor store might be reduced by very strong outdoor lighting.

The importance of “eyes on the street” was noted. That is, the more people on the street, the more eyes are available to deter criminal activities. However, the point was made that the eyes work better if there is training on what to look for and what to do.

Officer Snowden said that officers are encouraged to break up gatherings of youth if they appear to be suspicious, e.g., using or selling illicit drugs or planning a criminal act. He indicated that most officers were aware of suspicious cues. The constitutional issues were noted by not further explored.

A considerable number of violent crimes in Langley Park involve a broken bottle as a weapon. To deal with these crimes, the police and others are trying to encourage liquor stores to switch to plastic bottles or cans. Alas, several participants indicated that there is a negative taste difference—thus discouraging the store owners from switching.

Several participants worried about the many instances of slow response time (or no response at all). Officer Snowden said that 911 calls did not go to the police; rather, they were received by a separate agency whose workers establish response priorities. Several participants wondered whether the police officers could do a better job.

Sonia Kery of the Family Crisis Center noted the prevalence of domestic violence. She is working with others to open a counseling center in the area that would focus on this problem.

CSAFE’s Mary Kendall described her organization’s wide range of activities. Included was the national anti-crime event called National Night Out, to be held late afternoon on Tuesday, August 5 in the large parking lot adjacent to the former ToysRUs building. There will be food, music, various service organizations, and more.

Earlier in the week, CASA organized a meeting also focusing on crime and safety issues. The importance of separating issues of local crime and safety from immigration status was stressed. Suburban Maryland must not become outer suburban Virginia! Fortunately, many crime-fighting interventions are costly; and these days, such an investment is not likely.

What is to be done?

There has been a lot of talk. But what actions are to be taken? Will there be improved language interpretation? Will there be better lighting at Tick Tock (and elsewhere)? Will domestic violence counseling be available in Langley Park? Will more officers bicycle in the area or walk beats to humanize the police? What are the plans of the police to close the gap with residents? Lots of questions.

Will the current garden apartments be torn down, to be replaced by high-rise apartment and/or condo units? That will turn the neighborhood (and the garden apartments) upside down!

One element that might be introduced into the plan would be a requirement that no current tenant can be displaced by (re)construction. Alternatively, there might be a stiff requirement to have a high proportion of the new construction (between 30 and 50%) as affordable. The term “affordable housing” usually refers to housing that does not cost more than 30% of a household’s gross earnings. Alas, don’t bet on the affordable alternative!

Putting second or third stories on the four strip malls at the Crossroads is another matter. That clearly would enhance the area—so long as it wouldn’t drive out the marginal ethnic businesses.

APPENDIX: Urban Institute report, In The Face of Gentrification, provides a valuable set of alerts when redevelopment is being considered. Here are the opening paragraphs:

“Concern and anger over gentrification has grown in communities across the country as housing rental and sales prices have soared. Housing markets strengthened during the 1990s along with the national economy, and have remained strong even while the economy began to slow down in the spring of 2000, one of the few sectors to do so. Decreases in affordable housing units have accompanied the higher prices in many places, and there are numerous reports of resident displacement from neighborhoods long ignored that now attract higher-income households. Increased housing prices themselves are not a problem per se. It is when costs increase in predominantly lower-income neighborhoods where residents’ incomes do not keep pace that displacement can occur. As housing prices increase, lower-income households are at risk of being pushed out or prevented from moving into certain geographic areas because of the prohibitive costs and limited household earnings. It is this geographic component, along with restricted economic opportunities, that makes gentrification-related displacement a problem.”

“Crime” continued from page 1

“Plan” continued from page 1

“Short Takes” continued from page 2

EDUCATION: THE DROPOUT CHALLENGE

“Nearly one in three U.S. high school students drops out before graduating. In total, approximately 1.2 million students drop out each year – about 7,000 every school day, or one every 26 seconds. Nearly half of all African-American and Native-American students will not graduate with their class, while less than six in 10 Hispanic students will graduate.” That’s the scary state of education. One of the organizations trying to make a difference is America’s Promise Alliance, from which the quotation was drawn.

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It was to make Langley Park more “beautiful,” in the eyes of some officials, that the food vendors were removed. Here again, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. The vendor-free neighborhood now has, to some eyes, a very sterile look.

America’s Promise Alliance offers a wide range of information, especially focusing on youth. One item: According to the 2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book, Maryland ranks 19th among the 50 states in overall child well-being. The web site is http://www.kidscount.org.
A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education

A taskforce named “Broader, Bolder Approach to Education” has issued an important report advocating a new approach to the education of our children. Members of the taskforce include Julian Bond, Edward Fiske, Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, Alan Wolfe, and others of distinction. Here, we draw upon some of its just-released public statements. To explore the subject further, go to www.boldapproach.org.

“More than a half century of research has documented a powerful association between social and economic disadvantage and low student achievement. Weakening that association is the fundamental challenge facing America’s education policymakers.

“The nation’s education policy has typically been crafted around the expectation that schools alone can offset the full impact of low socioeconomic status on learning, a theory embodied in the No Child Left Behind law, which passed with bipartisan support in 2001 and is now up for reauthorization. Schools can ameliorate some of the impact of social and economic disadvantage on achievement. Improving our schools, therefore, continues to be a vitally important strategy for promoting upward mobility and for working toward equal opportunity and overall educational excellence.

“Evidence demonstrates, however, that achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status are present before children even begin formal schooling. Despite impressive academic gains registered by some schools serving disadvantaged students, there is no evidence that school improvement strategies by themselves can substantially, consistently, and sustainably close these gaps.

“Nevertheless, there is solid evidence that policies aimed directly at education-related social and economic disadvantages can improve school performance and student achievement. The persistent failure of policymakers to act on that evidence — in tandem with a schools-only approach — is a major reason why the association between disadvantage and low student achievement remains so strong.”

The “Broader, Bolder” taskforce calls for four efforts. What a great positive difference these efforts would make in Langley Park and perhaps almost everywhere. Will the needed changes take place? Don’t know. The called-for efforts:

Continued school improvement efforts. To close achievement gaps, we need to reduce class sizes in early grades for disadvantaged children; attract high-quality teachers in hard-to-staff schools; improve teacher and school leadership training; make college preparatory curriculum accessible to all; and pay special attention to recent immigrants.

Developmentally appropriate and high-quality early childhood, pre-school and kindergarten care and education. These programs must not only help low-income children academically, but provide support in developing appropriate social, economic and behavioral skills.

Routine pediatric, dental, hearing and vision care for all infants, toddlers and schoolchildren. Full-service school clinics can fill the health gaps created by the absence of primary care physicians in low-income areas, and by poor parents’ inability to miss work for children’s routine health services.

Improving the quality of students’ out-of-school time. Low-income students learn rapidly in school, but often lose ground after school and during summers. Policymakers should increase investments in areas such as longer school days, after-school and summer programs, and school-to-work programs with demonstrated track records.

COUNTY SCHOOLS INFORMATION

SUMMER: This summer, Prince George’s County’s school system is offering a variety of programs. Perhaps schools should be year-round; this is a step in that direction. The summer offerings include the Judy Center Summer Enrichment Program, a Head Start Extended Year Summer Program, an Elementary School Summer Program for English Language Learners, a Middle School Summer Program for English Language Learners, and more. For information about summer school, go to http://www1.pgcps.org/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=50994.

NEW STUDENTS: Early registration for new students, students who changed residence, and students who failed to properly register during the last school year begins Monday, July 7, 2008. Parents are urged to register their children before school starts to avoid delays. Immunizations are part of school registration. The new registrant must have some proof of county residence (e.g., a rent receipt), proof of birth date, and more. If a student’s primary language is not English, or if s/he was born outside the US, or studied in a foreign school system, contact the International School Counseling Office at 301-445-8460 for an interview and assistance in completing registration forms. Pre-kindergarten students register directly at the school. The details about new student registration are at http://www1.pgcps.org/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=53196.

Action Langley Park is a non-profit 501c3 organization working with many partners to improve the quality of life for the residents of Langley Park and its nearby neighborhoods by means of information sharing, advocacy, and events offering health and other services. Its monthly meetings are open to residents and others. To contact ALP, send an email to actionlangleypark@yahoo.com.

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