The Advocate: The police come to South of Broad

By **Jay Williams, Jr.**



PHOTO PROVIDED

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Neighborhood association meetings are usually snooze-fests. And since a former CEO of the South Carolina Ports Authority tried to convince a disbelieving audience that Carnival cruise passengers weren't tourists but "maritime cargo," Charlestowne Neighborhood Association (CNA) gatherings haven't been any different.

Until the last meeting, when things heated up.

"I'm at my wits' end at the lack of consideration with the traffic, with cars racing down our streets, and with music blaring at all hours of the day and night. I've been complaining to the police and others for years, and nothing's happened," Meeting Street resident Peter M. Williams asserted.

"I can tell you that when Ruben Greenberg was the police chief in this town, this never happened. Never. There's been a complete breakdown," Williams continued. "We've got hooliganism going on, principally on East Bay Street, King Street and Meeting Street. And the police have been completely nonresponsive. Sorry to say that, guys, but it's true…"

He wasn't the only one who spoke out.

The invited police officers in attendance pushed back, starting with Deputy Chief Anthony Cretella. He said the police reviewed about 720 hours of South of Broad data collected since April for Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. In that time, they issued 40 citations for various moving offenses, including speeding, suspended licenses, DUI and marijuana use. They are working, he said, to address these issues.

Cretella said most of the problems South of Broad are not tourist-related but are caused by people from North Charleston, Summerville and Goose Creek. Another officer admitted that Charleston does have a gang problem.

Another resident, requesting anonymity, said that on "some nights I have observed what may be an exchange of goods as cars and trucks pull up and block traffic where the motorcyclists park [on East Battery near Murray Boulevard.] Drivers and motorcyclists greet each other and may be exchanging items. Could be Girl Scout cookies, could be guns and drugs."

"The Advocate" reached out to several neighborhood residents, and none felt the police response to these quality-of-life issues has been adequate. All had a story to tell. This lightly edited account from a young woman was disturbingly compelling:

"On Saturday night, September 19, around 11 o'clock, I left my grandmother's house on East Bay to walk with three of my friends. We are juniors and seniors at the School of the Arts. What we witnessed was nuts and scary.

"There were about 20 cars drag racing up East Bay. They were taking up both lanes of traffic, so no other cars could get on the street. The noise was insane as they gunned their engines continuously. A police car turned out from one of the side roads with its lights on, but then turned back toward town without stopping anyone. Kids who looked college-age were on the sidewalk, drunk to the point where some were passed out. They were vomiting in the street. We saw a few guys urinating into people's gardens.

"My grandmother called and told us to come home because they had called the police, but feared they would not do anything. The noise lasted until about 2 a.m."



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High Battery is not a raceway, though some think they can get away with it.

A lack of enforcement

In a follow-up interview, Peter Williams acknowledged the police "have their backs against the wall. They have a lot of territory to cover, and they may feel that their limited resources should be deployed elsewhere." The data confirm that strain.

In 2015, Charleston's population was 133,579; by 2025, it rose to 165,318, a 24 percent increase. During those 10 years, the visitor count climbed from 5.1 million to 7.9 million, a 55 percent increase. Yet the number of police officers barely changed from 436 to 453, a three percent increase.

Williams says technology can bridge the manpower and enforcement gap, pointing to noise cameras in use in New York City and Denver. But as he knows, cameras that detect loud noise and read license plates for enforcement are illegal in South Carolina. Last month, he sent a presentation to Mayor William Cogswell to eliminate that statewide restriction, arguing that "noise cameras provide a fact-based, objective determination of a noise ordinance violation."

City Councilmember Mike Seekings, who spoke last at that "heated" CNA meeting, believes "the conversation we had the other night was about noise." And he says, "We have laws on the books to deal with that." Although this is not a new problem, "when it becomes a chronic issue, we do need to put resources and attention to it. By the way, since that meeting, we have."

Seekings believes Charleston's 24/7 noise ordinance is good, and that police are now conducting "pointed noise enforcement operations."

Speeding is a related issue, and some residents favor adding speed humps to address it. Seekings, no fan of speed humps, points out that owners of high-profile vehicles accelerate through them "because you don't actually feel them." He notes that newer regulations require speed humps to be lower than older ones to accommodate ambulances and other emergency vehicles. In addition, many streets, such as Meeting and King, are state-owned, not city-owned, so SCDOT would need to approve any changes.

"Speed humps will definitely add noise," Seekings says. "When a motorcyclist approaches one, they slow down but rev the engine to avoid stalling … then, when they reach the other side, they gun it."

Going forward, Charleston police have committed to having an officer on patrol South of Broad on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m.

The quality-of-life issues South of Broad go far beyond noise and speeding, and residents are demanding a stronger police presence to address them. Stepping up patrols on weekend nights is a good first step.

Residents may help by calling police through their non-emergency number, (843) 743-7200, or calling 911 for urgent issues.

As heated as the CNA meeting was, it produced results. Staying aware of your surroundings and communicating with police can only help. But remember, increased enforcement may ensnare more than just noisemakers and speeders, so stop at stop signs when you're driving!

Jay Williams, Jr. arrived in Charleston in 2001 to escape the cold and relax in the warmth of a better culture and climate. That worked well until May 2011, when he attended a cruise terminal discussion at Physicians Hall.