

The Oregonian

The dilemma near 82nd Avenue

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Jamie Francis/The Oregonian Morning, noon and night, sexual activity is a constant on 82nd. Here a would-be john is arrested after picking up a 14-year-old. He said he was just giving her a ride home; she said they agreed to \$20 for a sex act. Victimless crime? Not for this young girl, or all the kids and families in the area.

Don't tell anyone, but the plague of prostitution on 82nd Avenue has cleared up a bit in recent weeks. It's no mystery why: An aggressive police presence, combined with cooler temperatures, has made the difference. But neighbors along 82nd find themselves in a double bind. They're almost afraid to talk about the improvement for fear City Hall will ax the extra police patrols.

Police "get" that prostitution is a crime that generates more crime, and that no neighborhood should have to live with it *in flagrante*. Neighbors say police have responded quickly when they call to complain about sex-for-money in public. (Ignore it? You can't. It's grotesque and embarrassing. One retired couple say they were trying to serve their grandchildren lunch when they observed two people, half-in, half-out of a pickup parked near their house.)

But in contrast to the police, the City Council's response has been lackadaisical. This week, however, Commissioner Dan Saltzman met with the Montavilla in Action group and said he would help them carry their message to City Hall. Also, on Thursday, Saltzman expressed skepticism about the sacrosanct "treatment" option, the most popular approach in Portland for dealing with prostitution -- at least if it is not happening in *your* neighborhood.

The city may hand a big chunk of change to one faltering organization that offers treatment to prostitutes, Saltzman noted. "I'm sure they'd love nothing more than for us to give them \$250,000," he said. The money would help them hire staff and recharge their organization. Whether it would do anything to prevent prostitution on 82nd Avenue is far less clear.

Neighbors, meanwhile, have been gathering signatures on a petition asking City Hall to reinstate prostitution-free zones, but they've been advised this is a nonstarter. Since they are quick studies with day jobs -- and precious little time to lobby City Hall -- they've changed their strategy. Now they plan to ask the City Council to create an advisory council to oversee the situation on 82nd. And that would be swell. But the neighbors were also absolutely right to begin with.

The City Council *should* reinstate prostitution-free zones. Using this approach, police officers cited would-be prostitutes, pimps and johns for trespassing and excluded them from the area. (They could return for virtually any legitimate purpose, including doctors' appointments and employment; they just couldn't return to solicit sex.) When the City Council did away with the zones last year, prostitution soared on 82nd.

It was all a big mistake. The zones died because they were yoked to drug-free zones. The evidence showed a disproportionate number of African Americans were being excluded from the drug zones, but there was no such finding for the prostitution-free zones. The fact that both kinds of zones were eliminated was really a case of guilt-by-association.

Mayor-elect Sam Adams should work with Saltzman, Randy Leonard and new commissioners Nick Fish and Amanda Fritz (if she is elected) to reinstate the zones. In a city that supposedly cares about neighborhoods, this council should be big enough to care about 82nd -- and admit that it made a very serious mistake.