

Portland police Sgt. Richard Steinbronn isn't whether a fight will break out, but when and where.

Steinbronn figures shoulder bumping will likely be the match that lights the fire. Shoulder bumping, in Steinbronn's world, consists of drunken people squeezed onto too narrow a sidewalk, accidentally touching shoulders as they walk past each other.

Friday and Saturday nights, the streets of Old Town are turned over to

the bars and nightclubs that open their doors, let out the pulsing beats of their dance music and let in an estimated 4,000 young men and women who are out to party all night.

Steinbronn leads the Entertainment District police detail charged with keeping order. He says he and his four-person crews need help. He's got data to prove it.

During the past six months, on Friday and Saturday nights, the corner of Northwest Fourth Avenue and Couch Street, in the heart of the district, has been the scene of 207 police calls — about four a night.

Northwest Third Avenue and Couch Street has had 169 police calls. Second and Couch has yielded 76; Fourth and Davis, 81.

No other spots in Portland even come close to those numbers of police calls.

Most of the calls are the result of drunken brawls. Steinbronn estimates that for each fight to which police are called, three others have been handled by nightclub security people.

About once a year somebody gets shot and killed at one of these clubs. In August, a man pointed a handgun at patrons inside the crowded Dixie Tavern, but handed the weapon to police when they arrived.

The city is poised to commit to a six-month trial for the solution Steinbronn and nightclub owners are proposing — close a six-block area to all traffic. That means no cars — not even police cars — would be allowed on the streets.



by: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JON HOUSE - A man is arrested by officer Todd Harris after a bar fight outside Club XV ended with one combatant unconscious. Police are getting called four times a night - mostly about fights - to some Old Town clubs.

The plan is to open Entertainment District streets to bar patrons as they walk from venue to venue in the wee hours of the night. That, Steinbronn says, should cut back on shoulder bumping, as well as illegal taxis picking up drunken women at 2 a.m.

Will it represent a concession by the city that Old Town has surrendered to a level of noise and incivility that all but the club patrons should avoid?

Steinbronn says the time has passed for that discussion.

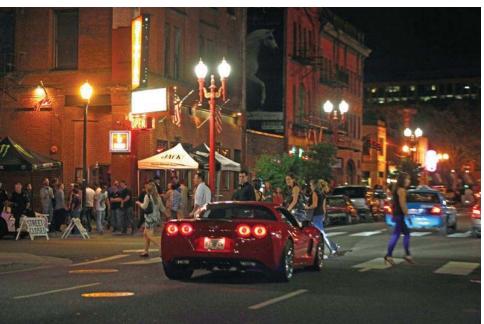
"It is here already," he says, adding that the relevant question now is, "How do we manage it so it's not a drunken debauchery and patrons and citizens can come here and feel safe?"

Nevertheless, Sarah Goforth, director of Recovery and Mental Health Services for Central City Concern, which houses recovering addicts and homeless people within the Entertainment District, says her nonprofit is concerned about the increase in noise and decrease in emergency vehicle access once streets are closed.

"This is not a good thing for the livability and safety of all low-income people living in that area," Goforth says.

Illegal taxis

At 11 p.m. Friday, Sept. 28, Steinbronn and his crew began their patrol. From inside the Old Town Precinct on Northwest Third Avenue they had watched a Liberty Cab stop in front of their storefront window. The taxi let out one passenger, perfectly legal. But as it waits for a passenger to take away, it is representative of one of the Entertainment District's biggest problems, according to Steinbronn.



by: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JON HOUSE - Police say the mix of pedestrians, cars and drinking make Old Town a disaster waiting to happen on weekend nights.

He and his crew have been tracking the illegal cabs picking up women passengers in the district. Often, Steinbronn says, they prey on people coming out of bars who are in need of rides home to the suburbs, and too drunk to recognize the risk. He says he has received Sunday morning complaints from women claiming they were either overcharged or worse.

"We'll get a call later:

'This cabbie touched me,'
"Steinbronn says.

Steinbronn estimates that

10 or 15 illegal cabs will drive by tonight. A little later, an Orange Cab drives north on Third. Steinbronn says his crew has reported that company's cars to city licensing officials throughout the summer and that the company has accrued \$33,000 in fines.

Officer Jay Gahan notes the license plate number, planning one more Monday morning report to the city revenue bureau.

Traffic on Third is starting to back up, which Steinbronn says presents another problem as an obviously intoxicated woman wearing stiletto heels wobbles across the street.

"A lot of these (drivers) are from Sandy," Steinbronn says. "They don't know they're supposed to stop for everyone. It's a horrible mix."

But fights are what Steinbronn and his crew are most concerned with as they walk south toward Burnside. On a recent Saturday night, they came across three brawls in 90 minutes, arresting eight people who had to be taken to jail. That took all the officers that were on the street, leaving nobody to patrol until they had returned.

The proposed Entertainment District plan would have a police van on a side street to transport people through the night, leaving Steinbronn's officers on patrol. It would also have designated taxi pickup spots on the edges of the no-traffic zone, forcing legal cabs to line up and keeping illegal ones under easy watch.

The officers head up to Fourth Avenue, where Steinbronn points to a group of food carts perched on the edge of the surface parking lot across from Ping. Around 2 a.m., fights will likely break out on that corner as bars close and hungry patrons rush to the carts, he says.

A block away, Steinbronn nods toward the controversial Right 2 Dream Too homeless encampment on Fourth and Burnside. The campers, who police their own doorway, have become allies, he says.

"They make great witnesses," Steinbronn says. "They see the fights and get really good descriptions and have no trouble telling us."

Running a gauntlet

Steinbronn's crew walks in and out of clubs to ensure that private security people are doing their jobs. Club XV tries to keep a damper on potential violence by posting a dress code sign out front. Its music attracts a crowd slightly older and more racially mixed than some of the others.

The dress code, too, is a concession to some of the patrons: no gang colors, no sagging jeans.

Security pats down patrons, looking for weapons, before they allow entry. They have also been instructed, as have security at other nightclubs, to not allow in people who are already intoxicated. Some of the bars have been instructed to not serve shots after 1 a.m.

With a nod to security, officers walk into Club XV. Steinbronn says they are looking for backpacks that could hide weapons, which would mean security isn't following the dress code.

Later, Officer Gahan heads into Couture Ultra Lounge on Fourth Street for an informal head count. Last Saturday, he says, the club was at least 100 patrons over legal capacity. Steinbronn told the manager if he didn't start sending people out, police would empty the club, count the patrons on the sidewalk and call in the fire marshal to issue a fine.

That's not an idle threat. Twice in two years on this detail, Steinbronn has done exactly that, and closed the clubs for the night. But tonight is relatively tame, and Gahan reports Couture doesn't appear to be over capacity.

Steinbronn says a lot of the summertime regulars have probably headed back to college. Also, Dirty Bar and Grill, a club on the corner of Third and Couch, has a one-week suspension of its license by

the Oregon Liquor Control Commission for a continuing history of assaults involving drunken customers.

But Steinbronn points to the sidewalk outside Couture. "It's the gauntlet," he says of the 15 to 20 men who are forcing people to walk between them. Steinbronn says most of the men have been barred from the club because they don't meet the dress code. They hassle women walking up the sidewalk, who look annoyed but continue on.

"It's like fishing. If they hit on 20, maybe they get one," Steinbronn says.

Open the street to pedestrians, he adds, and the women could avoid the gauntlet.

'Wasted and mean'

After midnight, the action picks up. At 12:30 a call comes in from Jinx, on 12th Avenue in the Pearl District. Someone has vomited on a table outside the club.

Steinbronn dispatches one of the police cars to handle it. A street party outside Dirty is going full blast, and Steinbronn reminds the manager that their city permit requires them to take down the noise level at 1 a.m.

A bleached blonde young man approaches the detail and says a guy up the street is trying to pick fights. "He's wasted and mean," the man tells police.

Gahan and Officer Ariana Ridgely take a look inside Berbati's and report possibly sighting a man who has a warrant out for harassing the camera crew of Real World, an MTV television show being shot in Portland. Steinbronn, Gahan and Ridgely go in together, approach a black man in a gray shirt and ask to see his forearm. Wrong tattoo — it's not their guy.

By 1:30 a.m., Ridgely notes a change in the street vibe. The bars are required to close at 2 a.m., yet there is still a line of people hoping to be among the last to get in to the Barrel Room on Third. Also, there are discernibly more people showing signs of inebriation on the tight-packed sidewalks.

"Now the 1:30 fights are going to start," she says. "They all get mad because they can't get in."

Sure enough, two men outside the Barrel Room on Third begin fighting, but are quickly separated by police. Minutes later, a call comes in about a possible fight at 10th and Couch. By the time the police arrive, only a few bystanders remain, talking about a U.S. Marine challenged by a group of hostile young men.

At 2:30 a call comes in from Berbati's, where a tense crowd is milling about and a black man lies unconscious on the sidewalk, a step away from the Club XV front door.

Another car beats Steinbronn's crew to the scene, and officers are already leading one alleged combatant — a white man — to the back seat of the patrol car.

Witnesses tell the story. What started as a one-on-one fight spilling out of Berbati's turned into two white men beating and kicking a black man while he was on the ground.

The man on the ground remains motionless and unconscious as the paramedics fasten him inside a curved plastic spineboard for transport.

The man in the back seat of the patrol car wasn't one of the original combatants, witnesses say. He jumped in and started kicking after the victim was motionless on the ground.

That, Steinbronn explains, will net him a charge of third-degree assault.



Entertainment District - Images by Jonathan House

The original combatant fled before police arrived. He could be charged with fourth-degree assault, a lesser charge, if police can find him, Steinbronn explains.

Before heading back to the Old Town Precinct to start the night's paperwork, Steinbronn walks along Fourth Avenue and notes that the food carts are still operating well past their agreed- upon 2:15 a.m. closing time.

It all adds up to a fairly typical Friday night.

"This is very common," Steinbronn says. "End of the night, testosterone is high, (expletive) is said, a fight starts."