

James H. Buford's Column

November 2006

A general rule of good housekeeping is that no good thing can come from sweeping dirt under a rug. Try as you might to clean up the other parts of your house, if you keep sweeping dirt under your rug, you will eventually have a very large lump under the carpet. Such is the case with the City of St. Louis. There is no doubt that the city has undergone an urban renaissance with the expansion of MetroLink, the renewal of the Downtown Loft District and the magnificence of the newly built home of the World Champion Cardinals. However, in the midst of all of this renewal there has been a constant underlying problem in St. Louis: crime. Thus, the stage was set for international embarrassment when St. Louis was ranked first in baseball, first in crime.

According to a book published by Morgan Quitno Press, St. Louis was ranked as the nation's most dangerous city in six categories: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and motor vehicle theft. Whether or not we agree with this ranking, St. Louis was also rated the most dangerous city in 2002 with much less fanfare. According to statistics from the City of St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department for the first nine months of 2006, there have been: 95 murders; 263 rapes; 2,278 robberies; 6,425 burglaries; and 6,060 car thefts. If these numbers don't speak to the fact that we have a problem, then I don't know what does.

St. Louis City Police Chief Joe Mokwa stated that the problem only exists in certain high-crime neighborhoods. However, the city's crime statistics say something different: nearly fifty city neighborhoods show elevated crime rates. This is more than just a few neighborhoods. Now, I understand the mayor, tourism officials, and civic leaders' enthusiasm for promoting St. Louis. However, I don't believe we should focus on urban renewal at the expense of crime containment. As you can see, criminal activity is like wildfire. If crime is not properly managed in one neighborhood, its effects will grow to encompass surrounding areas.

There is also an air of sweeping problems under the rug in St. Louis' African American community. Crime is a problem in black city neighborhoods that have yet to be resolved. Whether it is the preachers, civil rights leaders or community activists no one wants to address the proliferation of drugs, burglary and gun warfare in the African American community. The time has come for us to stop using the victim mentality of blaming the police and government for the growth of crime in our community. We have to be ready to take up the fight on our own because once the police increase their patrols we want to cry 'brutality' and start a protest.

In times past, the black community stuck together to build and develop its children. Today, everyone is focused on their own problems and we have more problems than ever. The time has come for us to let our troubled teens and young adults know that selling drugs and stealing cars are not economic opportunities. We have to let our troubled neighbors know that education and hard work are the only ladders out of poverty. We have to let those considering crimes know that it is almost impossible for someone with a police record to obtain employment and that their only future is prison. Now is the time for black pastors to counsel their flocks' rebellious family members to achieve a solution. It's time for black neighborhoods to form block units to discuss ways to fight crime. If the black community doesn't address the crime problem, we will have to deal with the harsh realities of excessive police force and an unfair criminal justice system.

Since we all know and realize that our city has a problem with crime, now is the time for everyone to make a concerted effort to lower the crime rate in St. Louis. Within the past two decades, the city has made great progress towards urban renewal. Now it is time for the city to make great strides towards bringing down the crime rate.