

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

THE IMPACT OF LINEAR PARKS ON POLICE SERVICES

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A primary function of local government is essential service provision to the community. This service includes public safety in the form of police, fire and emergency medical services, as well as water and sewer services. These are considered the basics necessary for a safe environment.

After these needs are met, city administrators look for services to provide that will enhance the quality of life that the general population enjoys. The area most often considered by both city administrations and the citizens at large is their city's park system. Parks provide a gathering spot for children, local sports groups, and neighbors looking for a quiet spot to meditate and enjoy nature. Parks are generally considered to be a focal point for any neighborhood.

The newest development in the evolution of the city park is the linear park system. A linear park is a series of parks linked by a common pathway, such as a bicycle, walking, or jogging trail, or can be a single park that follows the path of a natural drainage channel, such as a creek or river and connects to more than one neighborhood.

The necessity for this study originated with the City of Keller's plan to install such a park. Current plans call for the facility to begin at the west city limit and follow the natural channel of Big Bear Creek to the east city limit. It will span the entire length of the city and will include such facilities as softball diamonds, an equestrian center, a small fishing lake, and picnic areas. Also contained within the

framework of the park will be jogging, bicycle, and nature trails.

Because this park will be unique, the problem of what type of crime it will generate is of great concern. There are several areas that will not be immediately accessible to police patrol. Contingency preparations to protect the general populace need to be made so that people can utilize all facilities without fear of being victimized.

In preparing to research this subject, it was anticipated that a variety of crimes would exist in parks such as these. Among the problems would be alcohol/drug use, gang activity, sexual activity (legal and illegal), and crimes against persons such as assaults and robberies. Final results show this is not necessarily the case.

For purposes of research, three Texas cities with examples of these types of parks have been chosen. They are Haltom City, Wichita Falls, and Fort Worth. Two are located in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex and the third, Wichita Falls, lies approximately 120 miles northwest of the metroplex. The three range in population from 34,000 to 450,000.

The smallest of the cities is Haltom City at 34,000. Haltom City's North Park is a multi-use site located on the city's north side. Access is provided by U.S. 377 (the Denton Highway), a major north-south artery. The park is home to the Northeast Optimists Little League and contains two baseball

diamonds. It also contains a basketball court, playground, and picnic areas. The southern edge of the park has picnic areas and a nature area that follows the path of Big Fossil Creek for approximately one-half mile. It is surrounded on three sides by residential areas and a municipal golf course.

According to Commander Wayne McQueary, who oversees the Operations Division of the Haltom City Police Department and is a thirteen-year veteran of the department, Haltom City has never experienced a crime problem inside the park.<sup>1</sup> There were, however, no figures available due to a limited records system. The expected problems of alcohol and drug use that can normally be associated with an isolated area have never materialized.

The one problem that was unexpected was homosexual activity. Commander McQueary reports that the park was apparently listed in a national publication, targeted at a homosexual audience, as a recommended meeting place. The Haltom City police never saw the actual publication but several persons arrested by officers indicated that they had read about the park and decided to visit. After several undercover operations by investigators, this activity was greatly reduced.

The city's public works department cleared away enough underbrush along the creek banks so that the natural area was preserved, but the privacy needed for illegal activity was virtually eliminated. The only response from the police

department today is an occasional drive through by both patrol and investigative officers.

Wichita Falls, Texas, is in the process of installing a park that is very close to the concept that the city of Keller has designed. Lucy Park lies on the southwest edge of the downtown district and follows the channel of the Wichita River. It currently extends 2.12 miles along the river's pathway. It has existed for approximately three years.

The park is 167 acres at present and encompasses facilities such as picnic shelters, playground equipment, and an ornamental pond with fountains. The park begins with recreational facilities that link up with a nature trail. The trail travels south for 1.71 miles to a paved and landscaped river walk. The river walk winds east for .41 miles and terminates at a waterfall that is a replica of the original Wichita Falls. According to Joe Rasile of the Parks and Recreation department, the city plans to extend the facility an additional two miles to the east when monies will permit.

The Wichita Falls Police Department has experienced no problems with crime in this facility.<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Roy Stone said that after the park was first opened, they also experienced a problem with illegal homosexual activity. As the park became more heavily travelled, this activity disappeared. Stone said that the park is very quiet and that illegal activity simply has not existed.

To maintain this environment, the police department has

a midnight curfew for the park. This curfew is enforced by patrol officers who routinely patrol the park. According to Stone, the city has investigated the feasibility of creating a park police but did not pursue the idea due to the high cost of start up and the lack of necessity for a special unit at present.

The city of Fort Worth is the largest in the survey, with a park system that serves not only its own 450,000 citizens, but a large portion of Tarrant County citizens. The system considered for this survey is the bicycle/walking path that connects the city's Heritage Park with both Trinity and Forest Parks.

The 112-acre Heritage Park is located on the northern edge of the city's downtown district. It is situated on a bluff overlooking the Trinity River and is dedicated to the founding of the city in the mid-1800's. The bicycle trail begins at this point and follows the river toward Trinity Park to the southwest. It continues along the river past Trinity Park to Forest Park.

Trinity Park is a popular area due to its 252-acre size with playground and picnic facilities. Forest Park, at 233 acres, has the same type of facilities and is also home to the city zoo. The pathway and all three parks span a distance of approximately three miles.

Because the Heritage and Trinity Parks reporting districts both contain only a small part of an industrial

area, accurate statistics were available. Forest Park is included with a large area of housing and commercial development, making realistic numbers impossible to obtain.

Crime has decreased 69% in Heritage Park, from 176 offenses in 1988 to 55 offenses in 1989. Of the 1988 offenses, 67 were Part I crimes. Part I crimes are murder, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, larceny/theft, and auto theft. Part II offenses (public intoxication, disorderly conduct, etc.) accounted for 109 crimes. In 1989, these numbers dropped 49% (34 total) in the Part I category. Part II offenses dropped to a total of 21 for an 81% decrease.

The numbers are similar for Trinity Park, though the totals are not as great. Part I offenses decreased from 25 in 1988 to 16 in 1989 for a 36% drop in reported offenses. Part II crimes dropped from 27 to 21 for a 22% decrease. The overall decrease in crime is 29% from 1988 to 1989.

Group behavior generates most of the police problems in these parks.. These groups include homeless persons looking for a temporary place to stay, ethnic gangs, homosexuals, and survivalists.

Heritage Park's major problem is with the homeless persons, or transients. Because of its close proximity to the downtown area, it becomes a gathering place for transients to stay after being chased out of downtown or being released from the city jail one block west of the park. Some gang activity is involved but crimes are generally directed toward these

transients because they are easy targets.

Stan Ferguson, of the police department's Gang Intelligence unit, says that violent crimes are not a real concern for the police.<sup>3</sup> On weekends the gangs will gather in Trinity Park during the daylight hours. This is a social concept of "being seen" or "hanging out". According to Ferguson, "The gangs leave at dark to hang out at different locations on the main drags in their neighborhoods. Jack-In-The-Box on North Main is very popular."

Most of the gangs come from the Northside neighborhoods of Fort Worth and are composed primarily of Hispanic members. Ferguson says, "The black gangs are increasing, but the violence between gangs, no matter what race, stays out of the parks. The violence is mainly in the neighborhoods. It's a matter of territory, or turf, in the neighborhood, while the parks are considered neutral areas."

An increasing concern for police is the survivalist groups that meet in Trinity Park. "Sunday mornings look like field maneuvers with people in camouflage fatigues running around carrying paint guns," reports Ferguson. There have been no incidents involving these people but they are being monitored by the various divisions of the Fort Worth Police Department.

Ferguson is concerned at this point with the city's plan to link another park, Gateway, with the same trail. Gateway is very isolated in several areas because it is located along

the Trinity River and is considered a green belt, or nature park. This causes the park to have a high incidence of homosexual traffic. There is already a minor problem at the other parks previously discussed. Linking Gateway Park to the others may cause this type of traffic to spread to the trail used by the general public.

To combat the problems in these parks, the police department utilizes its various divisions in addressing whatever problem is currently visible. Increased patrols by both city and park police units, including mounted (horse) officers, tend to diffuse any threats of violence from gangs or other groups. Patrols are only increased when complaints are received from the public or other city officials.

Normal patrol tactics include patrolling the parks for the homeless persons. Because of a high rate of calls for service and a short staffed patrol division, the parks are not patrolled as frequently as police would like but they "do the best they can with what they have," according to Ferguson. The vice division keeps tabs on the homosexual problems and has been able to keep the activity to a minimum.

The most successful tactic used by the police department has turned out to be their newly-created bicycle patrol. Currently, it consists of nine police officers who use both donated and personal equipment for duty. The unit is still in the prototype stage and is continually assessed for procedure changes to increase efficiency.

Thus far, the bicycle patrol has made its greatest impact on narcotics offenders and dealers. The supervisor of the unit, Sergeant Esther Alvarez, said that each two-man team has averaged three to five arrests per day since April of 1989, when the program began. They have also been responsible for seizing seven to eight thousand dollars from narcotics offenders.

The officers wear knit shirts and shorts during warm weather, giving them the appearance of normal bicyclists until they are too close for the offenders to escape. Since the unit is new, it is too early for statistics to show if it will have a significant impact on crime. If it is successful and expanded, one of the primary concerns for bicycle officers will be park patrol.

In summary, these findings indicate that the city of Keller can expect no major crime increases with the development of their linear park. The common thread that runs through this study is that an initial problem with homosexual activity can be expected. The other problems experienced, such as the gangs and various groups, do not currently exist within Keller.

All of the departments contacted stated that there were no problems in addressing the various situations that arise. It has been accomplished with normal duty personnel and a minimal amount of extra-duty pay. There has not been a need to this point for creating any special units to contend with

the crime rates experienced. Indeed, only one city, Fort Worth, has a measurable crime rate for their park.

In all probability, Keller's linear park will be exactly what is desired, a community facility that will increase the quality of life for its citizens.

## NOTES

1. Commander Wayne McQueary of the Haltom City Police Department, interview by author, 03 December 1989. Telephone conversation.
2. Lieutenant Roy Stone of the Wichita Falls Police Department, interview by author, 25 November 1989. Telephone conversation.
3. Sergeant Stan Ferguson of the Fort Worth Police Department, interview by author, 04 December 1989. In person interview at the Fort Worth Police Headquarters, Fort Worth.