



# The Columbian

## Taking back Evergreen Park

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**BY JEFFREY MIZE, Columbian staff writer**

Evergreen Park is a pocket of lush grass and towering fir trees, a green refuge among the gray concrete along Fourth Plain Boulevard.

It has a modern playground, a walking path, a basketball hoop complete with three-point line. It should be a place where neighbors go to escape the bustle of this busy commercial area in central Vancouver.

Instead the park is quiet. Nearby residents are afraid to let their children play on its swings or run around on its soft grass.

"Most of my neighbors won't go into the park," said Judith Tiffany, co-chairwoman of the Fourth Plain Village Neighborhood Association. "The people that hang out there are scary looking, and you don't want to take your children any place where it's not safe."

Escalating concerns about gangs and violence reached a peak this past summer when news of a shooting at the park spread through the surrounding area.

Cpl. Duane Boynton of the Vancouver Police Department said the victim showed up for treatment at a Portland hospital and refused to say much, except that he had been shot at Evergreen Park.

"It was sort of a red flag for us that this might have been a gang-related thing and they wanted to retaliate," Boynton said.

Neighbors aren't overreacting to a couple of rough-looking kids with skateboards, Tiffany said.

"I work with young people," she said. "Young people don't scare me."

Tiffany said her 23-year-old son stays out of the park.

"Even at 6-foot-3, he doesn't want to be there by himself," she said.

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The graffiti on the ceiling of a gazebo at Evergreen Park has been painted over, only to have new graffiti applied to its supports. Neighbors are reluctant to let their children use the park's playground because of problems with gang members and other troublemakers. (JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian)



Cpl. Duane Boynton of the Vancouver Police Department was a frequent visitor to Evergreen Park this summer as police worked to ease neighborhood fears. (KELLY ADAMS/The Columbian)

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Since last summer, Vancouver police have been working to restore the park as a place that people don't fear. In July, Boynton volunteered to become one of four neighborhood police officers who identify specific problems and work with nearby residents and business owners to resolve them. One of his first priorities was Evergreen Park.

"There was an increase in activity, some gang activity, some graffiti in the park, which indicated to us that we have to spend some more time there," he said.

That meant removing graffiti, enforcing the 10 p.m. curfew, bumping up police patrols and using undercover and bicycle cops that might not be as conspicuous as black-and-white Crown Victoria police cars.

Boynton keeps a file of contacts he made during his almost daily visits to the park this summer. Several of the teenagers he met in the park were involved in the highly publicized fight at Fort Vancouver High School in late September.

Some of the teenagers identified at the park have been suspended or expelled from school, Boynton said.

"A couple of these kids are really walking on eggshells because we know who they are," he said.

In 1996, Vancouver police, the Clark County Sheriff's Office and the Washington State Department of Corrections created the Clark County Interagency Gang Task Force. Six years later, they dissolved the task force so officers could focus on identity theft and other problems.

Kim Kapp, Vancouver police spokeswoman, said it takes time for the effect of that decision to be seen in the community.

"We definitely know we need to play catchup in dealing with the gangs," she said.

Police were able to identify 15 to 20 juveniles who were the "primary troublemakers" at Evergreen Park, Kapp said.

"Some of them were known documented gang members," Kapp said. "Others were associates of gang members."

Police arrested about a half-dozen of these juveniles, she said. One of the conditions imposed upon their release from the Clark County Juvenile Center was that they to stay away from Evergreen Park.

"Now I am trying to figure out where they are," Boynton said, "because they can't hang out in the park."

Police also have worked with managers of nearby apartment complexes to make sure their parking lots and common areas don't become gathering points.

"When they get shooed away from the park, they come over here," said Debra Dachtler, manager of 103-unit The Villas at Bridge Creek on Brandt Road.

"A couple of times, I have asked them to leave," she said. "That doesn't go over very well. Dirty words are tossed around. And then when they start to walk away, they tell me that they can do pretty much anything they want."

Despite those experiences, Dachtler said police have been "wonderful" in helping address the problem.

"Every time I call, they are here," she said.

In Evergreen Park, graffiti is visible on the supports for the park's six-sided gazebo, but the park itself is relatively quiet.

"It seems to me the problem has moved out of the park," Boynton said. "When I go back to the park, I don't see anybody in the park."

Which underscores the problem. Even if Evergreen Park is a safer place today, neighbors aren't exactly pouring in to reclaim their park.

"We intend to do that," said Tiffany, the neighborhood association's co-chairwoman. "We just need to get more people involved."

The association recently organized a picnic in the park that attracted a sparse crowd, including some people who didn't even live in the area, Tiffany said.

"Even with free food, we only got about 30 people," she said.

Police understand that a bad reputation will linger. They have no intention of walking away from Evergreen Park, but they also accept there is only so much police can do.

"I would clearly say police are making a difference," Kapp said. "Are we there yet 100 percent? No, but I think it's better for people in the park."

### **Trouble in the park**

Evergreen Park is on track to have twice the number of crimes, 911 calls, police contacts and other incidents this year than it did in 2006, although the increase is partially due to police stepping up their presence.

(Year / Incidents)

1999 30

2000 52

2001 18

2002 125

2003 52

2004 62

2005 66

2006 86

2007\* 129

\* Through September SOURCE: Clark County Sheriff's Office

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