

CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW

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The CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW is a professional forum for the Criminal Justice System in California designed to provide discussion of varied concepts and issues of crime prevention and useful resources for the practitioner in the field.

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crime prevention review

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Crime and Public Services: Prevention/Reduction Through Environmental Design

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of recorded history man has written of both crime and the environment on everything from parchment to computers. Unfortunately, much of the effort was done independently and attempts to identify and measure possible relationships between the two did not occur.

The belief that intelligent planning decisions could and does affect crime and other anti-social behavior has been informally demonstrated throughout time. Prehistoric man would roll a large rock over the entrance to his cave at night to keep predatory animals from entering, thereby assuring a "safe sleep." In England, during the thirteenth century, a ruling lord caused the trees and shrubs along the roadway to be removed for a distance of two

hundred feet on both sides to provide the traveler an open "warning" area for approaching highwaymen. While the concept of providing safety through environmental design is not really new, it has, until recently, played a relatively small role in modern law enforcement.

Within the last two decades, both large and small communities have experienced a dramatic and alarming increase in criminal and anti-social behavior along with similar increases in calls for other governmental services. This perplexing phenomena, for which there are no simple answers, has created a national concern among citizens and government leaders responsible for solving these problems and providing necessary services.

DESIGN: A TOOL OF PREVENTION

Relationship of crime to design

Prior to elaborating on the role of the criminal justice system in the development process, it is necessary to define a crime, not in the textbook sense but as it relates to the subject at hand. In order for an offense or other anti-social act to be committed there must be the combination of opportunity and desire. Ideally, redirecting the person's desire from committing such an act is the most positive means of reducing crime, but we must realize this is not the role of the crime prevention officer and it is not something likely to happen overnight. We do, however, have the skills and knowledge necessary to attack the problem from the other direction—reducing and/or eliminating the opportunity. We must recognize that while we are trying to change the desires of society in the future, we have to alter the opportunities of the present.

Social acceptance

Perhaps now more than any other time in history, people are demanding more input into the type and style of environment in which they must live. Organizations such as the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Pollution Control Boards down to the neighborhood association give stark evidence to substantiate this premise. Therefore, to satisfy the needs and desires of today's citizens, we must be able to offer them a living environment which provides a meaningful degree of satisfaction combined with a reasonable level of safety for themselves and their property. The crime prevention officer must be able to incorporate justified safety concerns into new development without creating a "concentration camp" environment.

Assumptions

To understand how law enforcement can play an effective role in community development, we must first accept certain assumptions. First, it must be accepted that future development, or redevelopment, may have a significant impact on all facets of services. Planning decisions do not merely affect our planning functions but rather they impact, to various degrees, parks, recreation, fire services, utilities and law enforcement. Therefore, if the decisions on any development affects these areas, then logically the expertise of all disciplines is necessary for the intelligent results we all strive to achieve.

I realize, however, that bringing so many disciplines together in the decisionmaking process will undoubtedly result in conflicts from differing concerns and philosophies. We must accept the fact each discipline will have their own viewpoint, and that positive results can only come from the blending of concepts rather than as the culmination of one person's ideas.

The second of our assumptions in the criminal justice system does not want or advocate the building of "cement fortresses" as our cities of tomorrow. Concrete and barbed wire, while they may prevent some crime, will not and should not be tolerated by our citizens and those responsible for creating their living environments. Prevention through design should appear natural and flow smoothly with the basic design of the project.

The third assumption is that input from law enforcement must be offered as well as sought. The idea that policing is for police officers and planning is for planners MUST be abandoned. We in the justice system are not endeavoring to tell those in other disciplines how to do their jobs, nor are we looking to them to tell us how to do ours. Rather, we should strive to promote a process of communication between disciplines which results in a better "product." Only by making ourselves available and by seeking to provide our expertise can we hope to inform others of our concerns and how best we see their solution.

The fourth, and perhaps the most logical assumption, is that planning is necessary. Our involvement in the planning process must not be limited to the present, but must include positive input into the long range plans of our communities.

The fifth and final assumption to be made is that the justice system cannot do the job alone. The community itself must assume their share of the responsibility for providing a safe and livable environment. The combination of governmental, private and community resources can have a significant impact on the crime picture in our communities. If people do not utilize the cities and neighborhoods in a positive and constructive manner, they will quickly deteriorate into the ghettos of tomorrow.

The planning process

To be most cost-effective, the crime prevention officer must not only be familiar with the overall aspects of the community but with the planning processes used. Needless to say, the specific processes may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but they generally follow an identifiable pattern. In the typical municipality, decisions are made by either the planning commission or city council. These two bodies usually have ultimate decisionmaking powers and all input should have been made a portion of the overall package to be evaluated prior to rendering their decisions.

Benjamin Franklin's analogy of "a stitch in time saves nine" is most appropriate to the development process. The sooner law enforcement provides its input, the easier it is for both the developer and staff to incorporate those necessary changes.

A typical process may involve the development of three "levels" of a plan before being submitted to the planning commission for final approval. Normally, favorable review by the planning commission will mean approval by a council, but if not approved by the commission the developer

may elect to appeal the decision directly to the council in hopes of getting the prior decision overturned.

The three levels of plans in many cities are:

1. *Preliminary* This stage is simple and basic and will not depict exact boundaries or precise measurements. It generally shows only the basic street patterns, lot configurations, and open spaces, etc.
2. *Tentative* This plan will be more complete and contain more accurate measurements along with general unit locations and general lighting/landscaping locations.
3. *Precise* This plan will be exact in its measurements, lighting patterns and locations, landscaping designs, street alignments, etc.

The most ideal time for law enforcement to provide input is in the first two stages. Once a plan has reached the "precise" stage, it is difficult to facilitate anything other than very minor changes.

Each jurisdiction will vary to some degree in the process used and the method for input from the law enforcement agency. The actual method for the crime prevention officer to input into the process is a key element in the success of any prevention efforts through design. Input must not only be appropriate but timely. We cannot ask the other disciplines involved and the private development community to "drop everything" when we wish to comment. We must familiarize ourselves with the prevailing process and determine the most appropriate time and method.

While with the Fremont Police Department, I was a member of the City Technical Coordinating Committee (CTCC). This group was made up of representatives from the various departments such as planning, engineering, public works, parks, etc. The committee met on a regular basis to review all development plans currently under submission to the city. Different projects may have been at different stages of review but all were openly discussed at these regular meetings. The most significant result, aside from properly planned development, was the educational process which took place between the committee members. Before the committee began its regular meetings, I observed that each department concentrated only on issues directly affecting their operations—a situation which cannot be faulted under the circumstances as this was, and still is, the primary responsibility of each department representative. However, as we began to meet more and more I found not only myself but the other committee members becoming more knowledgeable and concerned with other department's needs and constraints. This "cross-pollination" reinforced the understanding that we were all working toward the same goal, building a better community for the citizens we served.

I do not contend that a "CTCC" arrangement is the only means of successfully implementing prevention through design; rather, I offer it as an example of one means of dealing with the issues. Each officer responsible for plan review and input will have to evaluate their own environment to determine the most appropriate method.

The general plan

Once assigned the responsibility to review plans and provide law enforcement input into the planning process, the crime prevention officer should embark on a logical and systematic procedure. The first step is to acquire and review a copy of the community's general plan. A general plan, as defined by many planners, is:

The official statement of a municipal legislative body which sets forth its major policies concerning desirable future physical development; the published general plan document must include a single, unified general physical design for the community, and it must attempt to clarify the relationships between physical-development policies and social and economical goals.

One of the nine required elements of a general plan is safety. Specifically within this element is a section stating that consideration shall be given to the design of a community as it refers to "defensible space". This statement within the safety element provides the crime prevention officer with the authority and responsibility to provide appropriate input into any changes to an existing plan or during the creation of a new one.

Since the general plan is basically a "blueprint" of a community's future design, the crime prevention officer can use it as a "predictor" of future needs and responsibilities. No other "vehicle" in the development process will provide an officer with the opportunity to impact such areas as major land uses, traffic circulation systems, open space and park areas, general densities, housing types, etc.

Environmental impact reports (EIR)

The passage of the California Environmental Quality Act in 1970 placed a requirement on public and private agencies which affects the quality of the environment to regulate such activities so that major consideration is given to preventing environmental damage. The effect on police services resulting from development has come to be recognized as an area falling within the intent of the act, and law enforcement agencies are now being consulted as to the impact of a given development on police services. The preparation of an EIR gives law enforcement the opportunity to present their estimates of the overall impact of a given development project on police services. These comments must be presented in the EIR along with alternative suggestions for mitigating the impact.

Since an EIR is the informational document intended to enable decision makers and the public to evaluate the impact of development on the community, it is important that the "realistic" impact on police services are professionally presented.

Impact reports are prepared in draft form first and returned to all agencies providing input for their review before being finalized and presented to governing bodies. It is critical that the person providing the initial input into the draft EIR review the document before it is finalized. Once submitted to a governing body it is virtually impossible to alter the input and, if submitted with errors, the resulting decisions will not reflect the true needs and/or concerns of the law enforcement agency.

TYPICAL DESIGN CONCERNS

My years of involvement with design review has taught me that many of the design features needed to incorporate effective prevention through design are basically the result of law enforcement's experience and sound policing procedures. The following are examples of design features which have been changed through input from the police which have resulted in a better, safer environment:

Addresses and street names

Most cities have a system for assigning street numbers to buildings but most have no plan for addressing units with off-street designators. This becomes a severe obstacle when dealing with large apartment or condominium complex where each living unit has a designator beside the street address. I found in one community that all off-street addressing of individual units was being done by the developer with no standard format to follow. The result was that each apartment complex had a different unit designator format and responding emergency services, if not familiar with the complex, spent precious time just trying to figure out the numbering or lettering sequence used.

The problem was raised with the next developers and they were requested to follow an off-street numbering system designed by the emergency service agencies. The system consisted of numbering all apartment units, for instance, in the clockwise direction commencing with the units nearest the main entrance to the complex. If there were less than one hundred units on any level, each unit would have as its first number the floor on which it was located. In this way responding emergency vehicles given an apartment number of 113, 213 or 313 would know the unit was either on the first, second or third floor and just off to the left of the main entrance ("13" being a low number indicating only twelve other units before it). To further expedite response by emergency agencies, the developer was asked to erect, at all driveways into the complex, "directories" schematically showing the complex layout and showing which buildings contained which units. These schematics were displayed in illuminated cases located close enough to each drive as to permit the officer to read it without exiting the patrol vehicle.

The selection of street names was also something being done by either the developer or a committee of some sort without the realization that emergency services can be adversely affected (1) by duplicate names between adjoining jurisdictions; (2) by names difficult to pronounce under stress; or, (3) by having several streets so similar in sound as to be confusing over the phone or radio. When the problems associated with improper street naming were brought to the attention of the planning commission, the police were directed to review all future names for response problems. Additionally, three adjoining jurisdictions developed "future street names" lists and exchanged them to ensure there would be no further duplication.

Emergency vehicle access

When dealing with open areas such as parks, law enforcement often comes into conflict with parks and recreation departments, or so it would

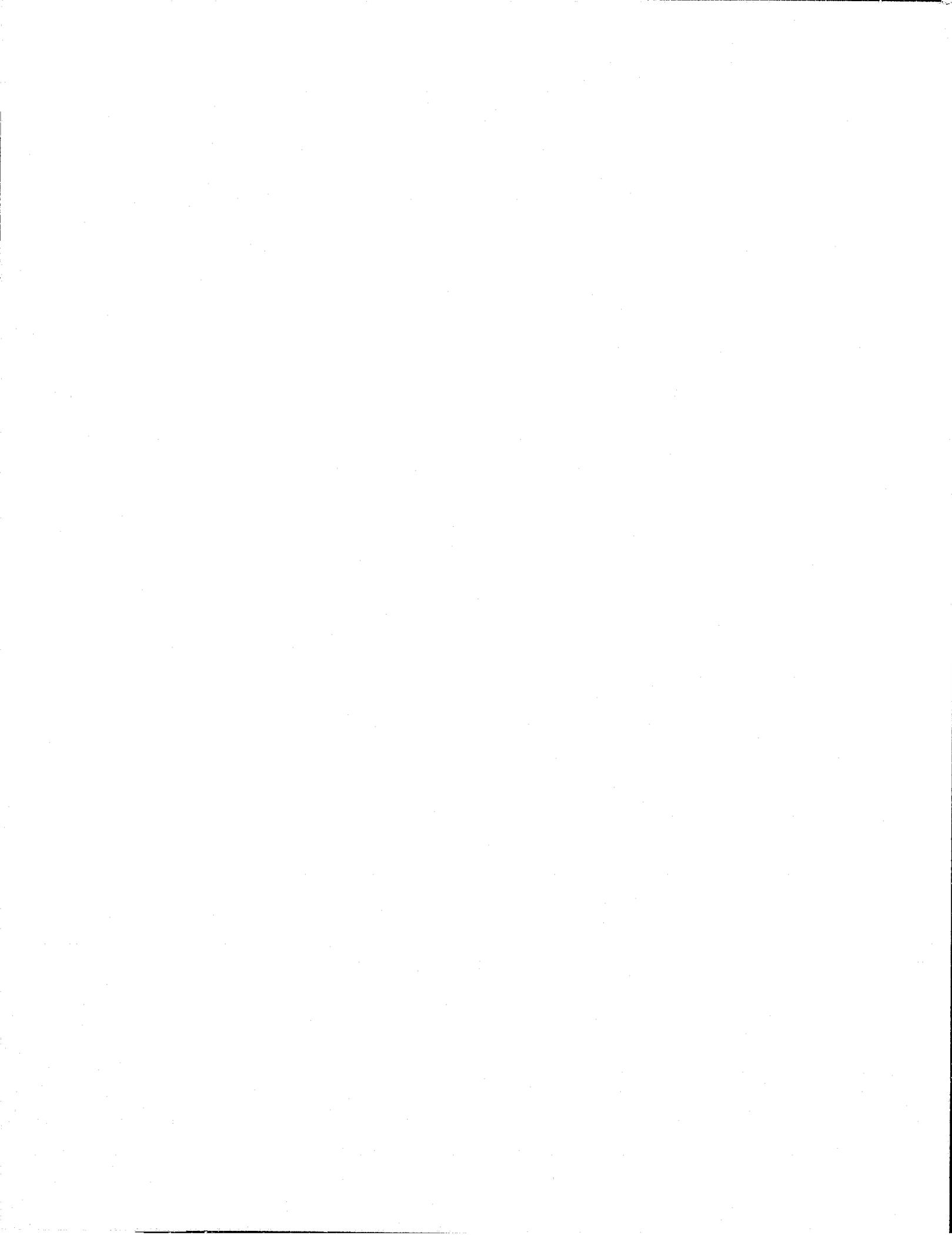
appear at first. Police tend to require the ability to drive emergency vehicles into parks and open spaces, while those responsible for the parks balk at the additional asphalt needed to provide the roadways. Both viewpoints are valid and, after discussing the situation, it was determined that the proposed four-foot-wide sidewalks traversing the park could be expanded to a width of eight to ten feet. This added width would accommodate a patrol vehicle or other emergency equipment while at the same time not appearing to be a "road." The widened walkways also provided a larger "territory" for people using them and use increased. The important concept learned was that emergency vehicle access did not automatically equate to asphalt but could be provided through incorporation into some other design feature such as pedestrian ways and other walkways.

Illuminated unit numbers

Police and other emergency services face an additional problem during darkness—locating unit addresses. Most streets lack sufficient light to satisfactorily read house numbers. The use of illuminated fixtures saves valuable time in responding especially when the emergency is medical and involves a person who has stopped breathing. Also, it allows patrol officers to respond in a more effective manner to prowler and other calls by not having to use a spotlight or flashlight in attempting to find the victim's residence. I do recommend that such fixtures used have a light colored background with dark numbers or letters rather than the reverse. The fixtures with the light backgrounds are easier to read from medium to long distances.

SUMMARY

It has been my intent, in this article, to stimulate those of you in crime prevention units or in other positions which include responsibility for plan review in your agency. The field of prevention through environmental design is just now coming into its own, and the need for greater involvement and study by all responsible agencies is now being recognized. I hope I have been able to offer a new perspective to your concept of crime prevention, and that you will find environmental design as functional an aid as the various other "tools" we use in crime prevention.



END