

Talk about crime in Halifax and then talk some more

By MARILLA STEPHENSON

THE WORLD is on our doorstep and the politicians and tourism boosters are doing their boisterous best to push Halifax as a town that thrives on delivering happiness, hockey and a mega dose of hospitality.

Then there is the shady side of our streets.

Bumping up against widespread coverage of the IIHF world championship — and ongoing celebrations at neighbouring watering holes — are headlines like these:

"Girl Critical After Stabbing, "Man, 21, gunned down, "Man dies from stab wounds, "Man arrested after shooting on Halifax street.

I expect my phone will ring shortly with a call from law enforcement officials to suggest media coverage of crime in this city is overblown. If that's really the case, why is the city spending all that money to add new police officers?

Speaking of the city, whatever happened to the mayor's round table on violence? It looks like one of those round tables that just keeps spinning in circles, without ever getting anything done.

Mayor Peter Kelly announced his round table in November of 2006 in response to the murder of American sailor Damon Crooks outside an Argyle Street bar. That was 18 months ago, folks.

Thus far, the round table has managed to stage a series of public meetings — they were staged last fall after it took a year to organize them — plus both phone and mail-in surveys were undertaken.

The report is due to be completed soon by criminologist Don Clairmont. Kelly recently told The Chronicle Herald that he hopes to make the report public around the middle of this month.

Well, that timing will give Kelly a few headlines of his own, plus a nice leap on the crime issue in advance of the fall election in which he will seek to retain his job as mayor.

But what has an 18-month period of surveying crime in this city, then drafting a series of recommendations, done to reduce the problem?

By the time the recommendations get to the implementation stage — no doubt after another committee has a look at them, then sorts out the various levels of government responsibility and overlap — I expect the election will be over and the crime problem will have evolved into something that needs to be surveyed again.

In November, I wrote that one year into the round-table process, Kelly was still taking about thinking about doing something.

Curtis Sliwa, founder of the Guardian Angels, had been to town, talking about opening a chapter in Halifax.

Kelly was noncommittal, then negative. Not right for Halifax, he said. Sliwa's crime?

Stealing Kelly's thunder.

Yes, crime is often not random and attention has to be paid to the root causes, not just solving cases after the fact.

But perceptions can be hard to change and there is no question that Halifax is getting a black eye for the series of violent incidents this city has been experiencing over the past few years. What is being done about it?

In a mere six months, Sliwa has managed to found a Guardian Angels chapter, recruit volunteers for his citizens' patrols, launch a training program and get his team ready to hit the streets. Patrols are expected to begin by the end of this month.

And they'll go right to the heart of the shady sides of our streets.

They are the places where we'd rather people felt safe and able to walk without fear.

In an interview last week with Chronicle Herald reporter Michael Lightstone, Sliwa said the group will be in regular contact with the Halifax Regional Police.

"We're going to let them know in advance where we're going, what we're doing and how we're doing it.

Now there's a word: "doing.

It's not examine, it's not consult, study, recommend or survey. It's "doing.

A word a mayor might even learn to live by.

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Marilla Stephenson's column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.