

Guardian Angels eye return to Fall River

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Fall River — As the Guardian Angels seek a foothold in New Bedford, the group's leader Monday said they could soon land here.

Guardian Angels founder and director Curtis Sliwa said Fall River has been put on the group's map after a number of city residents approached him before and after he and other Guardian Angels marched in New Bedford's Feast of the Blessed Sacrament parade Sunday. Those he spoke to, Sliwa said, mentioned problems on Brayton Avenue and the recent Fifth Street shooting that left one man dead. Sliwa said he has also received e-mails from city residents and noted problems on Brayton Avenue were again brought to his attention, as well as, gang-related issues.

He said expanding into Fall River will be discussed as the group completes training exercising in New Bedford, a process that will likely last until past Labor Day.

"A lot of people from Fall River spoke to me as we were waiting in line and pointing out the problems," Sliwa said. "We exchanged information, and once we're up and running in New Bedford we'll look at Fall River. We have to be a success in New Bedford first. ... I'm surprised people were coming up to me prior to the start of the march, but many of them were mentioning the same issues that I saw in the e-mails."

Sliwa said that based on the response of residents who contacted him, there is enough interest to start researching the potential for Fall River as a future site for the group.

But as the group looks toward Fall River, local officials aren't sure what to expect from Sliwa and the Angels.

Ines Leite, spokeswoman for Mayor Robert Correia, said they haven't heard from anyone associated with the Guardian Angels.

"They haven't contacted the mayor's office and we need to learn more before we can say anything more," Leite said. "We need more information at this point."

Police Chief John Souza said he is "skeptical" about the group's presence in Fall River. He said community members are already serving as the eyes and ears on the streets and reporting crimes. He noted the department's tip line has proven to be a successful tool to acquire anonymous tips from the public.

"I do understand their entire concept and what the individuals are doing in the community, being recognizably dressed in particular attire, acting as the eyes and ears for law enforcement, but we already try to instill this in the community and have done so over the years," Souza said. "Every time we speak at community meetings we are encouraging community members to act in that manner."

The Guardian Angels patrol neighborhoods in groups without weapons, dressed in trademark red berets, white T-shirts emblazoned with their logo and black pants. The group had a presence in Fall River, holding its first patrol in November 1983 with the support of the City Council. Souza said he recalled the group being in Fall River for about six months.

Souza said he will listen if Sliwa or a representative wants to talk about a return.

"I'm a little skeptical as to what their reasoning is and what they hope to accomplish," Souza said. "I'm not saying absolutely, positively no. I'm a person who is willing to listen to what anyone has to say."

City Councilor Raymond Hague, who chairs the group's Public Safety Committee, said he didn't know if a Guardian Angels group would have much of an impact, adding that through his discussions with neighborhood groups he has not heard a request for a local Angels chapter.

"I don't see a problem with their presence, walking around, but they are not a substitute for the lack of police we have right now," Hague said.

Hague, like Souza, also suggested the city's neighborhood groups have done a respectable job in aiding the police.

"It would have to be a cooperative effort, but I think we're doing a pretty good job with the neighborhood groups now," Hague said. "They're not walking around with berets, but they don't need to. They're doing the job silently and helping out."

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