

Editorial: Downtown guardians

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SAVANNAH RESIDENTS, unhappy with rising robbery, homicide and auto theft crime rates last year, are looking at some unorthodox ways to make their neighborhoods safer.

One option takes the neighborhood watch concept one step further. Starting a local chapter of Guardian Angels, the unarmed corps of volunteers who provide a visual deterrent to crime, is a worthy idea that can only help. Meanwhile, another option, hiring a private security firm to patrol downtown neighborhoods, is questionable.

Established in 1979 in response to crime problems in the Bronx, Guardian Angels chapters have been started in 25 cities in North America, as well as in parts of Europe, Japan and Brazil.

At first, the privately run program was viewed with suspicion and considered on par with vigilantism. But now, communities usually welcome the members. Unarmed and wearing their trademark red berets, the volunteers, in pairs or trios, conduct safety patrols on city streets. Their visibility makes would-be criminals think twice.

Their focus is on quality of life issues -- public urination, panhandling, fighting and harassment of merchants and customers, problems that can set the stage for more serious crimes. But make no mistake: The Guardian Angels are no substitute for smart, effective policing. New York, for example, became a much safer city when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani made public safety a priority and attacked crime at all levels.

About 60 residents met Wednesday night with two Guardian Angels from New York to determine support for a Savannah chapter. The group would be similar to an organized, trained and identifiable neighborhood watch program, providing more eyes and ears on the street to help police. If enough people are willing to commit their time, this proposal would be a welcome effort.

But the hiring of a private security firm to patrol downtown streets, as being considered by some members of the Downtown Neighborhood Association, is more problematic.

The plan, as unveiled this week, calls for one private guard in a marked car, which would patrol the downtown from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. nightly. The guard would notify police of suspicious activity and, possibly, serve as a visual deterrent to crime.

However, it comes at a price. At a cost of \$25 a month per household, with a minimum of 168 subscribers, it means residents would pay a total of \$4,200 a month for eight hours of patrol every night.

The downtown proposal mimics one used in Ardsley Park during the 1990s, prompted by murders and other violence attributed to the Ricky Jivens gang. But how effective is one rent-a-cop patrolling a wide area?

If the same guard is used regularly, would he or she fall into a pattern that would be easy for culprits to determine, and elude? If a series of guards are used, will they be on the job often

enough to know the neighborhoods and whether someone or something is out of place? Besides, a major complaint from residents is that more officers should be walking or bicycling through the neighborhoods, rather than cruising by in patrol cars. Why pay extra for the same thing?

The Savannah Police Department, obviously, has the front-line responsibility for public safety. It's unfortunate that residents feel the need to supplement police protection, either with the Guardian Angels or a private security guard. But of the two options, the Guardian Angels, with local residents voluntarily taking the responsibility of watching their neighborhoods, is preferable.