

Pine Hills crime watch on agenda

Meeting tonight to focus on possible revival of defunct safety group

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ALBANY -- Students, city police and security officials from the University at Albany and The College of Saint Rose will meet tonight to discuss creation of a community watch around student sections of the Pine Hills neighborhood.

"Crime here has escalated tremendously," Anton Konev, a University at Albany graduate student said last week when he announced the effort, which would revive a watch last active in Pine Hills about a decade ago. Konev escaped a mugging on Washington Avenue in September.

Standing at the corner of Western Avenue and Partridge Street, near the downtown UAlbany campus, Konev was joined by three other students and the head of the local Guardian Angels chapter to say that students will soon be walking the street to improve security.

"You always hear about bad behavior by the students. This is a chance for the students to do something positive," said Patrick Sorsby, a student at Albany Law School.

The head of the neighborhood association in the Pine Hills, where some residents have long complained about student misbehavior, welcomed the community watch. But Henry Madej also warned that it can be difficult to maintain motivation in volunteers, something that contributed to the demise of the last neighborhood watch about a decade ago. "You start wondering if you are doing it all yourself," Madej said.

Konev said city and university officials agreed to train student volunteers at a Tuesday session at The College of Saint Rose security center on Western Avenue and about a half-dozen students are already willing to take part in street patrols.

But city Public Safety Department spokesman Detective James Miller and university Director of Personal Safety and Off Campus Affairs Thomas Gebhardt said that tonight's meeting is only to discuss how to create the community watch, not to train volunteers.

"We will be having a preliminary meeting to look at the possibility of having the watch rejuvenated," said Gebhardt.

Miller also disagreed with Konev that the city wasn't doing enough to keep students safe. "We welcome student participation," said Miller, adding that any community watch needs "guidance and supervision" from the city. Miller said that crimes against University of Albany students dropped 48 percent between 1992 and 2005.

Konev said his experience with crime was personal. He was assaulted Sept. 22 by six teenagers on Washington Avenue near Lexington Avenue, but not seriously injured. It was three weeks before city police took a report from him, Konev said. The muggers have not been caught.

Jeff Blay, head of the local Guardian Angels chapter, said his members started patrolling the Pine Hills student areas last Saturday and will help students with the street patrols. "We are very supportive," he said.

Konev, Alfredo Balarin, who is running on the Independence Party line for the 11th Ward Common Council seat, and Guillermo Martinez, a 19-year city resident and member of the Coalition to Save Albany,

said the city should push for state permission to impose a commuter tax and use the money to pay for more police.

"We need to stop the exodus of young professionals and middle-class families from this city. The commuter tax is an opportunity to stall the decay of our neighborhoods," said Balarin, who is on the ballot with Democratic incumbent Glen Casey and Republican Jason Wright and Working Families Party candidate David Lussier.

Balarin and the others called for an income tax on commuters into the city of one-third of 1 percent, which they said could yield up to \$18 million a year.