

Oakwatch: The Code Enforcement Project

Minutes: May 4, 2022

Featured Speaker(s): Councilman Kraus, District 3; Councilperson Strassburger, District 8; Councilman Lavelle, District 6; Linda Barrone, City of Pittsburgh Police; Jamie Ducar, Pitt Community Affairs; John Tokarski, Public Safety; Rebekkah Ranallo, Mayor's Office, Carla Panzella, Pitt Dean of Students

Liz Gray provided the introduction for the meeting. She discussed agenda items, including the shift to a quarterly schedule for Oakwatch, block party permitting, Airbnb safety, and general updates from enforcement officers.

Block Party Permitting

Councilman Kraus gave some background on the history of Wellsfest and suggested that the discussion begin with the Mayor's Office and the law department, as that was the root of the Wellsfest permit. He also suggested that once talking to those parties, preemptive approaches to shoring up the permitting should be the next course of action. He would like to see the permit prevented from being issued in the future.

Councilwoman Strassburger suggested greater emphasis on coordination between the special events office, Public Safety, and the Department of Public Works. She mentioned that conversations are happening around enforcement. Liz Gray pointed out that though the Office of Special Events Websites says they require petition approval from neighbors for block parties. In the case of Wellsfest, the two long-term residents on Wellsford Street were not alerted about the event plans and that the Wellsfest activity barricaded them in their homes.

Kraus mentioned that repeat offenders being in the same homes, even if the tenants differ, might require intervention with the homeowners rather than the tenants, and that landlords should be looped in. Kraus also mentioned the Social Host Ordinance put into place ten years ago and suggested retraining officers to help intervene with the lessees.

Officer Barrone added that her office has been working with the new Coordinator of Public Properties to identify and document disruptive properties. She added that she asked to send a letter educating the disruptive properties stating they have been identified, these are the rules, and this is what could happen if you don't follow them. They want to emphasize shared liability for the owner and lessees.

Comment: I want to agree with Liz. The same properties are the party houses each year, but it's different people each year. When you say it's the owners who have responsibility, they do, but if we don't have citations issued, then the owner doesn't even know there's a party going on. In our particular situation, the police come, they go to the door, they go to the top of the street, and then the party starts all over again. We also have what they call party runs now, four houses in a row. When the police come, they run out of one house and into the next one. So, for a while, there was a policy in place that said if the police came to a property there had to be a citation issued or there had to be a report as to why there was no citation issued. So I'm wondering, is that policy still in place? How do we get to the owners if there are no citations issued for the disruptive property?

Officer Barron said at the very least what her office can do is generate a report. What her office had done with nuisance property before, aside from the actions that were taken via citation or breaking up the party, was to provide calls to service with the reports as well. In the background, she stated that they still have that piece of data to add to the reports that give a stronger hold on the action needed. She added that it was something they could take a look at to generate across the board. She also emphasized the need to start citing kids and underage drinkers.

Q: What legally provokes an officer to be able to enter a house party?

A: You can ask to go in, you can ask to speak to the person hosting. But you have to have some reason to gain entry there. If there is a fight, if there is an intoxicated young person, for example. It's sometimes very difficult to get in. We've tried, in different ways, to tell them it's a safety issue. It's hard to tell if someone is 18 or 21. Sometimes if we cite people and take them to court, we lose because we didn't actually see them drinking.

Q: What about actually going after the party host? The one supplying the alcohol?

A: You can't always see where it's coming from. A lot of times, we don't know who it is. We try to get there early because we know someone has to bring the keg or beer, but we don't always see it.

Q: Do you still have an officer on social media?

A: Yes, we monitor information from social media all the time.

Q: Is there an underage curfew in the city?

A: No

Councilman Kraus noted as Rebekkah Ranallo joined from the mayor's office, that City Council would lean heavily on administrative oversight to provide answers to the solution of curtailing parties, disruptive properties, and recurring events like Wellsfest in Oakland.

This was Ranallo's first meeting with Oakwatch since taking her job in the Mayor's office, and she attended to hear the conversations taking place, but she agreed with what was being said and wants to be an educated leader in the community before taking on the workload.

Q: When someone does answer the door when doing a knock and talk, are you legally entitled to ask for legal identification?

A: We ask a lot of questions, including for identification. They can choose not to answer though, and that's not a crime.

Q: Are you able to ask who the leaseholder is for the property?

A: Sure.

Q: What largely is the reaction to that question?

A: It runs the gamut from "My cousin" to "my parents." I've heard people say "I have permission to be here." Some people don't answer the question at all.

Q: What about the sidewalk? Is that the same scenario?

A: No. I can go up to anyone on the street and ask them questions, so long as I don't impede them. They are under no obligation to respond to me.

Comment: I want to agree with Councilman Kraus. We are entering a new frontier. As we consider policies for preventing these huge parties, we have to acknowledge that they've changed over the years. For example, we used to see kegs delivered at noon the day of the party. We don't see that anymore. There aren't keg parties anymore. We see multiple students bringing their own supplies to parties. On my street, we might have multiple parties going on at once. Typically they always have a spotter outside.

Q: Is information about citations shared with the University?

A: If they are students, sometimes. A lot of times the students don't want us to know they're affiliated with an institution. We share information when we can. We have contacts at Duquesne, Pitt, CMU, you name it. When Universities reach out to students, it really does have teeth. When students realize there are more stakes involved, it does more than we can do.

Q: With rental registration coming on board, do you think we could have access to the data that's going to be brought in on owners of properties?

A: That data will be publicly available.

Q: Will rental registration give police more info about property owners?

A: Yes.

Q: When the police arrive and cite a person at parties, could that citation be sent to the disruptive property office?

A: That should be automatically happening with the police reports. The officer has to choose to ID it as disruptive property. Still going to use 311, PLI, and calls for service to demonstrate the patterns of a particular property. The more data, the better. Establish prior complaints, and determine actions from these reports. These reports can be added to on the basis of other complaints and reports. Based on these reports, if there is enough information, they will pursue judicial steps by partnering with the law department.

Q: Does Pitt Police have access to the disruptive property reporting process?

A: Not directly, but we share information and build files for properties. They listen to what the neighbors say, bring up all past reports and documented information to then go through PLI, 311, calls for service, etc. It is a problem that they recognize and they will take legal action based on data that they have and as long as the police commander at the time believes there is enough data.

Q: Has the Pittsburgh Police been given access to using this automatic reporting and report consolidation function?

A: It is Pittsburgh Police's own report system that Pitt Police do not have access to. What they do is share reports with each other. Share information between universities to get the file built for individual properties.

Q: Can Jamie Ducar explain the avenues of communication between Pittsburgh and Pitt police that take place when making stops at a party?

A: The University of Pittsburgh Police and Zone 4 do share a lot of information; however, how it makes it back to the conduct office has changed. There has been a shift in leadership. During the pandemic, they assembled a cross-functional team to keep a close eye on the neighborhood and will be coming back in a permanent fashion. Standing Monday meetings will be held with Pitt Police to know what is happening in the neighborhood. They do have a concern connection for households they suspect are being occupied by Pitt Students to take action on the conducting end without a citation.

Councilman Kraus asked Ranallo to communicate that they want to reinstate the disruptive conduct program with full force and would like the support from Mayor Gainey's office that they need.

Q: What is the most appropriate action to take when a party is taking place? Specifically, how should neighbors address this issue and how can they follow up as individuals?

A: If you see there is an issue and you want to report it later, you call 311 if it does not need immediate attention. If it is happening at that point, call 911 and you will get an immediate response. If you see someone standing outside a party door, then you know it's probably a party. If people go to the back of the house, keep an eye too. If the party becomes quiet when the police arrive, and then restarts when they leave, you can call a second time, and then the police can go in again. Need neighbors to testify when needed.

We'd love it if you called the police before the party became super disruptive. There are many folks to call, the most important being 9-1-1. We also appreciate if folks can identify the spotter, or if there are alleyways around. We encourage people to also call 3-1-1, just so we have as many points to document calls of service. We can take any and all things to document the party. Videos, photos, you name it. The sooner the police are notified the better. Whoever is called, Pitt or Pittsburgh police, they both will come to address a property.

Q: If Pitt responds to a call, you still get that data?

A: Yeah, we come and back them up, and there's a record of it.

Q: Are you getting excessive noise data from 3-1-1?

Yes. 3-1-1 will send it to the Zone of occurrence and other times up to administration. They will send it to each dutiful location in the department.

Geof Becker described an event that occurred at 210 Ophelia street, which is an Airbnb that has become a party house. Sent emails to Kraus and Bell about this information. On April 2, they had a party that was so big there was cars all over the block and blocking driveways. Police responded timely to his call. Two cars were towed. Called again because his driveway was blocked again, and the police came and gradually broke down the party. He guessed it was roughly hundreds of people. He signed this off as a social media college party. As he watched the party break up, he saw four young men approach a car and pull a gun out of the backseat, which they wrapped in a towel.

Q: What follow-up has happened as a response to 210 Ophelia St?

Q: Let me ask you, did you notice a change of activity when it changed into an Airbnb?

The history of the house is that the city sold it to the sidewalk program for \$25; it was later sold to a developer for 50K. It then was bought and turned into an Airbnb. It's concerning that Airbnbs are being bought in Oakland and hosting parties.

Q: Can we create some kind of process where we request that an officer do a knock and talk that's a repeat offense?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Is what qualifies as a nuisance property going to change?

I'm not sure. There was talk of editing the ordinance, but I don't know where we are on it. It is a good tool for us, and we want to revamp some things so we can cite more now than we have been able to previously. In the past, it referred to agreements to make changes with owners and the city for the owner to take action to do things. If the owner does not follow through with their end of the agreement, legal action will be taken. We can start by educating property owners about the result if action is not taken. A letter should be sent to residents as well to show what can happen if they continue disturbing the neighborhood.

[Ophelia Street owner] believes a letter should be sent to the owner of the house on 210 Ophelia on April 2nd for how many officers responded and the amount of time they expended.

Q: Are citations shared between Pittsburgh and Pitt Police?

A: No. There is not a system. They correspond all the time, but they do not receive citations directly. They get their reports every week and in these reports the citations live. That is the sharable thing. They do not get copies of the citation given.

Q: Is there one place where all citations live?

A: No. There is no place, despite it being the same legal precedent. They all go down to the court.

This makes it difficult to respond effectively to disturbances since neither parties have all prior information accessible at all times in an efficient fashion. Would like to have a conversation with Ducar about creating a more efficient communication system between the two police forces.

A number of proposals are making their way through the university regarding off-campus housing, so in the near future action will be taken directly from the university.