

Making Downtown St. Louis Safer

A Five-Point Proposal

February, 2022

Introduction

Downtown St. Louis has experienced increased disorderly and criminal activity in recent years. The reputation of Downtown as an unsafe neighborhood has only grown as the media has called attention to high profile crime. Gunfire is common, along with disorderly and threatening behavior, assaults, car “cloutings”, vehicle-thefts, and many other violent and non-violent crimes. It will take a concerted, consistent and long-term effort by civic leaders, law enforcement, other City agencies to make Downtown meaningfully safer and restore the reputation of the neighborhood as a safe place to do business, to live, to be entertained, and to visit.

What follows are a series of action steps for policymakers to consider that can help make Downtown safer. Importantly, most of these actions are not the responsibility of law enforcement; rather, they involve various regulatory steps and voluntary actions by private entities that are designed to reduce the sources of criminal and disorderly behavior in our community. While a few of the action steps in this five-point plan are being undertaken in some form already, there must be an across-the-board approach that deals with the entire safety agenda. That doesn’t exist now, and this plan is an appeal for community leaders to accept that challenge.

I. Problem Properties

There are too many properties Downtown that, because of their function or the way they are managed, have become a principal source of crime and quality-of-life issues in the neighborhood. Some examples that were ultimately closed down by citizen advocates and city government working together are the 7-11 convenience store at 17th and Pine, the New Life Evangelistic Center, and the Reign nightclub. The proliferation of short-term rentals in residential buildings are a recent phenomenon due to low occupancy in some apartment buildings. Parties and events taking place in these units have generated fights, gunfire, and other lawless activity. Drug dealing is also a problem in some residential buildings.

1. More aggressively address nuisance properties

Problem: The city is not proactive in addressing and abating nuisance properties.

Action: Diligently work with Aldermen and the Neighborhood Improvement Specialist to identify nuisance properties that are a source of social disorder and lawlessness. Develop a thorough record by tracking issues and calls for service to the police. Persistently urge city government and the CID to address nuisance properties by engaging the property owner, and, if necessary, take steps to close offending establishments using zoning actions, building code violations, licensed facility violations and other regulatory actions

2. If necessary, litigate to compel action

Problem: Litigation is sometimes necessary to compel a property owner and the City to take action to abate the problems caused by a nuisance property.

Action: Establish a legal fund to pay for legal expenses. Act swiftly to keep a nuisance property from continuing to be a nuisance in the long term.

3. AirBnB's and other short-term rentals

Problem: Large parties and other disruptive behaviors connected with short-term rental properties have been a source of disruptive and criminal behavior.

Action: Enact legislation to limit the number and use of short-term rental properties. Work with landlords to reduce short term rentals based upon long term plans for increasing rental rates and occupancy.

4. Drug dealing and other disruptive/illegal behavior

Problem: Sale and use of illegal drugs is taking place in residential properties in Downtown.

Action: Work with property owners, management companies, SLMPD, Aldermen, and the Neighborhood Improvement Specialist to evict known drug dealers from residential units. Create a record and document illegal activity. Make building management accountable for illegal activities taking place on their properties. Establish an apartment managers association that tracks drug

dealers evicted from Downtown apartments. Keep an active list of evicted drug dealers and obtain commitments from apartment managers that they won't rent to individuals evicted from other apartment complexes.

5. Engage the community

Problem: Too many property owners or residents do not know what to do when they have identified these offensive activities.

Action: Organize property owners, offer guidance on how to combat these issues, and connect them to legal services. If inattentive property owners know the community is engaged they will respond more vigorously.

6. Proactively Engage Landlords

Problem: Certain properties are disproportionately likely to attract nuisance tenants, such as the Reign space (very large and hard to subdivide) and former convenience stores (which are easily turned back into new convenience stores).

Action: Proactively engage property owners with such spaces and help them identify alternative tenancies or ways to remediate their spaces to attract non-nuisance tenancies.

II. Liquor Licensing

The high concentration of establishments selling alcohol has created problems downtown, especially along Washington Avenue where residential density is highest. Disruptive establishments create quality-of-life issues such as excessive noise, general disorder, and periodic violence. If a large residential population is going to live along busy commercial thoroughfares, then there needs to be appropriate regulatory tools and enforcement to allow bars and entertainment venues to coexist with residential properties.

1. Enforcement by the Excise Division

Problem: The Excise Department frequently fails to enforce the existing Excise Ordinances.

Action: Push the Excise Department (and City Hall) to greatly increase enforcement against liquor licensees in violation of the Excise Code, including those renting to 3rd party promoters, keeping a disorderly establishment, generating noise violations, selling to minors, operating illegal sidewalk patios, etc.

2. Provide Additional Resources to the Excise Department

Problem: Excise has suffered from inadequate staffing and outdated equipment due to improper funding.

Action: Encourage the Mayor and Board of Alderman to provide an adequate budget for the Excise Office to allow the Excise Office to fulfill its responsibilities and enforce all relevant ordinances and regulations. Add liquor patrol officers and other necessary staff to increase enforcement capacity. Also, strongly encourage the State of Missouri to reinvigorate their excise office to provide assistance to the City's office.

3. Develop and Advance Ordinance Requiring 50% Food Sales Along the Washington Avenue Corridor

Problem: Establishments have increasingly become dependent upon the nightlife and entertainment elements of their business model, almost inevitably leading to becoming disorderly nightclubs.

Action: Amend the Excise code to require 50% food sales for all alcohol selling establishments in the Washington Avenue Corridor and Laclede's Landing. Exemptions could be made for small-scale breweries or spaces of less than 1,000 sq feet.

4. Restrict Promoters

Problem: Establishments are increasingly prone to illegally renting out their licensed facilities to independent promoters to increase revenue, often attracting big unruly crowds.

Action: City ordinances prohibit the renting of liquor licenses to third parties. This is a citywide phenomenon, but it most concentrated Downtown. Ensure the Excise Commissioner works with

SLMPD to identify illegally promoted events (most are advertised in advance using social media) and aggressively enforce City ordinances. This should not apply to people who simply earn a fee for recruiting people to attend a venue or performance.

5. Catering Licenses

Problem: Non license holders have obtained caterer's permits to circumvent the normal application process for normal, full drink liquor licenses.

Action: Consider amending the Excise Code to address provisions (potentially only applicable to Downtown) related to catering licenses that are being used as a loophole to allow bar / club owners to avoid applying for a liquor license by operating a bar / club through a temporary catering license. For Downtown, reduce the number of temporary catering licenses the Excise Commissioner can issue to any "venue" to three per year, from seven. Moreover, impose sanctions upon those using catering permits if any disruptive events are held.

4. Easier Protests

Problem: Neighborhood protests of liquor licenses are difficult because the protest representative has to secure the original signatures of 51% of property owners or tenants within a 30-day period. It is a difficult and time-consuming process that generally favors the licensee.

Action: Investigate ordinance changes that would reduce the length of time and expense it takes to successfully protest a liquor license, in part to discourage licensees from becoming nuisance. It may be necessary to reduce the discretion of the Excise Commissioner so that once the signatures of 51% of surrounding property owners are obtained it's an automatic loss of license with no discretion granted the Excise Commissioner.

5. 3:00 am Licenses

Problem: The concentration of bars along the Washington Avenue corridor with many facilities licensed to remain open until 3am have directly contributed to disorderly and criminal activities. These establishments also contribute to the cruising problem, as cruising typically is a late-night activity co-located with late night bars.

Action: Eliminate 3am licenses in the Washington Avenue corridor. For 3am licenses in other parts of downtown, enforce the provision in the Excise Code that prevents the Excise Commissioner from issuing a 3 am liquor license until the licensee both 1) has been in operation for at least one year, and 2) has achieved a certain level of sales.

6. Good Neighbor Agreements

Problem: Good Neighbor Agreements promulgated by the Downtown Neighborhood Association are valuable tools to mitigate liquor license problems. However, the effectiveness of this agreement is limited by voluntary compliance and the unwillingness of the Excise Division to condition liquor licenses upon compliance. Some prospective licensees have refused to voluntarily sign Good Neighbor Agreements developed by the Downtown Neighborhood Association.

Action: The Excise Commissioner should be required by ordinance or otherwise to require all new Downtown liquor licensees to sign a Good Neighbor Agreements. And, subsequently, the Excise Commissioner should enforce the conditions in those agreements. For certain establishments where extra conditions are needed, these agreements should place extra conditions on the license and ensure their enforcement.

7. Excise/SLMPD Cooperation

Problem: The Excise department and the SLMPD have not effectively worked together to deal with problem establishments.

Action: Encourage the Bike Unit and 4th District Officers to coordinate with the Excise Division to supplement Excise's manpower resources for enforcement actions against problem liquor licensees (e.g, identifying licensees that are renting out their liquor licenses or non-licensed establishments). Identify other resources that could be made available to assist, including ATF and the Missouri Excise Office. Designate a few Bike Officers as liquor license subject matter experts and have them focus on downtown liquor selling establishments.

8. Public Drinking

Problem: Individuals are often visibly drink on sidewalks, while sitting in and on cars, and in parking lots. Establishments also may allow patrons to leave with to-go cups.

Action: Have the SLMPD strictly enforce open container laws and laws against to-go alcohol. Punish establishments that offer to-go containers.

III. Unhoused Populations

Downtown St Louis has recently become the home for a disproportionate number of homeless service providers. This leads to a high concentration of homeless individuals in a very small area. Panhandling, drug dealing and use, and encampments on public property are just some of issues resulting from Downtown's role as the region's home for unhoused populations.

1. Engage surrounding communities

Problem: Downtown and the City of St Louis service a disproportionate number of the region's unhoused persons. The City of St Louis spends over \$14 million on homelessness services while surrounding counties spend a fraction of that amount.

Action: Support efforts by the City of St. Louis and the Continuum of Care to engage surrounding communities and help them participate in the effort to push homelessness to functional zero. Encourage them to increase funding to address the problem. If the surrounding counties won't voluntarily agree to provide care for their homeless citizens, consider legal action.

2. Prevent NLEC from operating at 1411 Locust or elsewhere Downtown

Problem: The New Life Evangelistic Center, prior to its closing due to numerous building code and life safety violations, was a concentrated and largely unregulated center of unhoused populations. NLEC refused to participate in programs designed to alleviate the problems of unhoused populations.

Action: Use any legal means available to ensure that NLEC is not allowed to re-open an unsafe facility and engage in unproductive and non-collaborative behavior.

3. Encampments

Problem: Groups have encouraged the creation of impromptu encampments by distributing tents to homeless individuals. This perpetuates the homeless cycle and discourages unhoused persons from seeking supportive services and moving toward permanent housing. Encampments have been the source of increased noise, trash, rodents, and other quality of life issues. Encampments are also a major target for drug dealers that prey on the homeless.

Action: Do not allow encampments to form in Downtown by dismantling them at the earliest stages and providing targeted services to anyone residing on the site. Educate other groups and organizations on federal best practices and the Housing First model.

4. Legal and Media Action

Problem: Surrounding communities often drop off their homeless in Downtown

Action: Advocate for legal action against surrounding municipalities/counties who continue to bring homeless individuals Downtown, and work to expose this practice in the media.

5. Traveler's Aid

Problem: Homeless individuals from outside the region often find themselves Downtown and cannot get back home.

Action: Provide support and funding to Traveler's Aid or another organization that helps homeless individuals in St. Louis who are not from the area return to their home community.

6. Retail Liquor Sales

Problem: Alcoholic beverages in forms favored by homeless persons are sold in retail stores resulting in public drinking and intoxication.

Action: Condition all Downtown liquor licenses for retail stores to prohibit the sales of certain items listed in the DNA Good Neighbor Agreement. Items prohibited are...

- No chilled beer can be sold in the "to go" form costing less than \$5.
- No liquor can be sold less than 500 milliliters.
- No wine can be sold in a smaller package than a standard glass bottle of wine or a 4 pack of wine with a volume equal to 500 milliliters (standard glass bottle of wine); no sweet or fortified wine can be sold in any package.
- No alternative beverages (like Margaritas in plastic bottles) can be sold in a smaller package than a 4 pack.

7. Illegal Provision of Food

Problem: Individuals, groups, and organizations often bring food Downtown to feed the homeless in parks, sidewalks, bus shelters, etc. The food is often prepared in an unregulated kitchen exposing risk to the homeless. Discarded food is unsanitary, attracting pigeons and rodents.

Action: Enforce laws against serving food on Downtown streets in violation of public health rules and contrary to homelessness best practices. Educate groups providing food on federal best practices and the Housing First model.

8. Reduce Panhandling

Problem: Aggressive and widespread panhandling by the homeless and others.

Action: Create and promote a coordinated campaign to discourage giving money to panhandlers, as doing so encourages the practice and does not address the homelessness problem.

9. Fully Adopt and Implement Homelessness Best Practices

Problem: Many of the service providers in the City of St Louis do not follow best practices and instead perpetuate ineffective and outdated practices to address the problems of the unhoused.

Action: Adopt the following federal best practices

- Housing First - Partner with the City and service providers to implement the Housing First model, with an emphasis on Rapid Re-Housing and a de-emphasis on overnight shelter and transitional housing¹.
- Assertive Community Treatment Teams² - Help fund and manage a 2 person ACT team that works exclusively Downtown, including identifying all persons who are homeless in the system (including those trying to stay “off the grid”), where they are from, and their barriers to exiting homelessness in St. Louis.
- Support Funding for Housing First - Lobby the health care industry to supply funding for efforts to push high acuity homelessness to functional zero, which should dramatically reduce unreimbursed healthcare costs, as has happened in other communities.
- Off the Grid Providers - Advocate for the closure of facilities or providers who operate “off the grid” contrary to best practices.

10. Changes to the Continuum of Care

Problem: The Continuum of Care, a collaboration sponsored by the City of St. Louis, is dominated by service providers that violate best practices, and adopts policies that help perpetuate homelessness in the City of St. Louis.

Action: Advocate for changes to the City of St. Louis Continuum of Care that include 1) separating it into its own not-for-profit entity, and 2) restructuring its board membership so that non-affiliated community members have majority control (including a seat for a Downtown advocate) and conflicts of interests are mitigated.

11. Change Goals

Problem: The current “goals” of the system are not consistent with research-based and widely accepted best practices or City interests. The goals of the system effectively are to concentrate the regional homeless people in the City and then perpetuate homelessness within its boundaries, with the main concentration being in Downtown.

Action: Advocate for very specific and formal goals (reducing the number of homeless individuals in the City of St. Louis) versus the informal goals that are actually in effect (helping as many homeless people as possible within the boundaries of the City) – the revised goals should drive very different strategies and tactics.

¹ See, for example: Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. 2017. *Permanent Supportive Housing: A Solution-Driven Model*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance.

² Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) is an integrated team-based approach designed to provide comprehensive community-based supports to help people remain stably housed. It is one of the most studied community programs in all of healthcare and has a very strong evidence base.

IV. Cruising and General Traffic Lawlessness

Downtown St Louis is negatively affected by cruising, motorcycles, illegal vehicles (ATV's, minibikes, etc.) every year, especially during warm weather months. The major areas affected areas are the Washington Avenue corridor, Laclede's Landing, Broadway, and 4th street, though the affected areas grow every year. Areas surrounding downtown are commonly used as staging areas for this activity. Often the City of St Louis will address this issue by deploying resources for a short period of time. While this approach may have some limited effect in the short term, in the absence of a long-term strategy cruising returns full force and often results in disruptive or criminal incidents. Without the consistent police resources, changes in infrastructure, and other methods to frustrate this activity, the cycle continues. A long-term strategy is needed.

At the core, cruisers come Downtown to cruise because it is fun and easy. There are lots of cruisers, a proliferation of late-night bars, few police that hassle them, and cruisers can break the law with fear of legal consequences. The key to reducing this disruptive activity is making Downtown far less attractive for cruising.

1. Get ahead of the problem

Problem: Action is generally delayed too long into the Spring until conditions deteriorate before addressing the matter.

Action: Start addressing the issue in late February or early March. If enforcement starts early enough, then the message will get out to the cruising community that Downtown is a no-go zone. This will make the problem much easier to deal with in the summer months.

2. Street closures

Problem: Downtown streets are often left open during peak times when this activity takes place.

Action: Close streets like Lenore K. Sullivan, Washington Ave from 12th to 14th, and parts of Broadway to frustrate the cruisers and motorcycles. Downtown should no longer be attractive for cruising and other negative behaviors.

3. Traffic calming

Problem: Downtown infrastructure is overbuilt and encourages reckless driving and speeding.

Action: Install traffic calming measures as needed including planters with gates so streets can be easily closed to through traffic, curb bump outs, metered parking, parklets, etc. Put stop lights on flashing red during weekend nights.

4. Secure the Eads Bridge

Problem: The Eads Bridge is a gateway into Downtown that is often used by individuals for speeding, criminal activities, and reckless driving. It is also a spine for the cruisers and a getaway spot for criminals in Illinois committing crimes Downtown and fleeing back into Illinois.

Action: Install gates to allow the police to close the bridge on weekend nights. Partner with Illinois elected officials and law enforcement agencies to coordinate closings if possible – if not possible, the City, as the owner of the bridge, is within its rights to unilaterally close it. Missouri and Illinois officials often complain about interstate crime and it would be beneficial to have mechanisms in place to control the movement of local interstate traffic.

5. Secure gathering spots

Problem: Various properties in and around Downtown are used for cruisers, minibikes, motorcycles, and ATV's to gather.

Action: Aggressively seek out gathering spots (i.e. under the Poplar Street Bridge, Shady Jacks, properties along South Broadway, the Riverfront, the graffiti wall, etc) and target those gathering spots for enforcement (i.e. build a perimeter with multiple cars and issue citations to violators within perimeter and tow cars).

6. Make Downtown its own police district

Problem: The current 4th District is far too large, extending from Chouteau up to Grand and Broadway. Crime has increased Downtown since the number of districts were reduced back in 2014. The crime and policing strategy in Downtown compared to the neighborhoods to the north is much different; inefficiencies are created when such disparate areas are included in the same District. This practice creates competition for resources that leads to suboptimal patterns of law enforcement. This also reduces the manpower needed in Downtown and the northern neighborhoods of the District.

Action: Add a district for the area north of Cass and make Downtown its own police district. In this scenario both areas will no longer compete for resources and Downtown will have dedicated officers.

7. Regularly deploy the Traffic Division, SWAT, and Specialized Units

Problem: Downtown often needs sufficient police resources in addition to its normal coverage to suppress the cruising, drag racing, and other illegal driving.

Action: Secure police resources to deploy on weekends to combat the aforementioned issues. The Traffic Division, SWAT, and other Specialized Units have made a difference in the past when deployed Downtown.

8. Prioritize cruising and traffic enforcement

Problem: Other types of crime and 911 calls are given priority over cruising and traffic enforcement. Also, special events and protests consume District 4 and Bike Patrol resources.

Action: Prioritize enforcement against cruising related illegal conduct (e.g. traffic, alcohol and noise violations) on every shift, every day, particularly when the weather is warm and in the evenings. Use overtime to create separate specialized units for events, parades, protests, etc.

9. Establish DUI and Safety Checkpoints

Problem: Motorists are often under the influence, causing frequent crashes. Many are also carrying illegal weapons, drugs, and have outstanding warrants.

Action: Establish checkpoints to check for alcohol/drug and other violations (i.e. illegal conditions on vehicles).

10. Change the SLMPD towing policy and impound vehicles, minibikes, and ATVs.

Problem: The current towing policy requires permission by a driver detained by the police to tow their vehicle. Change the policy to give discretion to the SLMPD to tow and impound.

Action: This is a SLMPD policy. Persuade the Mayor's Office and Police Chief to make changes to this policy to allow for towing of cars when necessary. Increase the capacity of tow lots or use contract towing and vehicle storage.

11. Motorcycle and Car Clubs

Problem: Many lawbreakers are involved in motorcycle or car clubs that use social media to film and promote their often unlawful activities downtown.

Action: Approach motorcycle and car clubs about stopping abuses happening Downtown (a focused deterrence type practice which includes a warning not to continue these behaviors).

V. Surface Parking Lots

Many Downtown surface parking lots are not properly secured. Unsecured parking lots are preferred sites for vehicle break-ins and theft, public drinking, the shooting of fireworks, firearm discharge, large unruly late-night gatherings, stunt driving and other disruptive and illegal behavior. Unsecured parking lots are also staging areas for cruising, another persistent problem Downtown. Law enforcement officials maintain that securing surface parking lots would greatly reduce crime and other disorderly behavior.

The City of St. Louis should consistently and vigorously enforce existing ordinances and, if necessary, enact new ordinance/regulatory authority to require parking lot owners to secure their property. The following should be requirements:

1. A minimum 4-foot-high fence around the lot perimeter with appropriate decorative finials to discourage unauthorized access.
2. Visible camera(s) with red/blue blinking lights linked to the SLMPD Real Time Crime Center.
3. Adequate lighting. LED “white” lighting is essential to aid cameras on site (spotting colors, facial features, etc.).
4. Automatic gate arms and one-way on and off lots should be required in the absence of full-time attendants.