

Coatesville Under Siege

While this message is intended for a broad audience, it is particularly intended for the residents of Coatesville. It is a call to action as self-defense is a fundamental and constitutional right. It is also a prayer and a plea to take a unified stand against criminal elements within our midst, depriving each and every one of us a right to happiness.

The historic City of Coatesville, Pennsylvania has been and is undergoing an assault from forces inimical to its peace and prosperity. In recent weeks, that peace has been shaken by a spate of attacks on people and property including home invasions. In the not so distant past the City has suffered the decline of its major industry and job base. But even more debilitating to its affluence and tranquility has been the erosion of community values and general well-being by the concentration of the County's welfare population within the City limits. This ill-conceived policy has resulted in crimes that attack the basic rights of the residents of Coatesville.

The response to urban crime is predictable. Coatesville, like virtually all other major urban centers, has substantially increased its police force. Coatesville's police force has grown by nearly half in this decade alone while expenditures on police have trebled. In the first half of the past two years, total arrests have gone from 584 in 2007 to 586 in 2008. Even so crime persists. Why haven't such extraordinary efforts by the City given the desired results?

Honey Brook Borough is twenty minutes from Coatesville and doesn't have a crime problem. It also doesn't have a police force. Honey Brook doesn't have a crime problem because it doesn't have criminals. Coatesville has a crime problem because it has a lot of criminals. Most studies of the prevalence of crime in urban settings identify social disorganization as the major contributing factor to criminality; not the amount of police. And what are stronger contributing factors to social disorganization than broken homes, unemployment, mis-education and the temptation of easy money? All these factors are multiplied by concentrating them in the County's most densely populated and lowest income municipality without thought to consequences or funding to ameliorate quite predictable outcomes. While Coatesville labors under this unfunded mandate from County driven public policy, its residents suffer. They have a right to

protect themselves from this unwanted onslaught of public housing derivatives from the Housing Authority of Chester County. What's to be done?

The City needs a coherent strategy for both today and tomorrow; born of thought and reason--not hysteria or motives of political advantage. Working with members of City Council, the Police Force and the broader community, the administration has developed a set of programs to best protect our public interest. Combined, there is good reason to believe that effective execution of these programs will reduce criminal outbreaks in the near term and lead to a more tranquil community in the future.

In the short term we believe in taking our streets back, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood. A major initiative is the careful re-establishment of the Neighborhood Watch programs designed to create a unified line of defense through collective strength and a formal working relationship with our law enforcement officials. The City has already announced plans to eliminate blight through Operation Beautification which includes cleanup campaigns, the elimination of vacant housing and a re-organized Codes Department. Curfew centers are being established for youth violators. Ordinances are being developed to punish shamefully negligent parents. Police patrols now emphasize walking the beat as well as cruising through it. Weed and Seed funds have been re-directed toward supporting these efforts. These community policing programs are enhanced by renewed emphasis of Zero Tolerance to the drug culture and threats to human safety. But most importantly, we need to end the Code of Silence that gives tacit support to lawless elements within our and hinders investigative efforts.

For the future, nothing more than the complete revitalization of the City will weed out the dark forces of lawlessness that fester within the blighted recesses of our City. All people of good will, at all levels of government, should rally around the City's efforts to eradicate blight and create a new generation of honest and hard working Coatesvilleans. By re-establishing amenities, reducing taxes and raising property values, Coatesville can uniquely recreate itself just as other communities such as West Chester and Phoenixville have done. Call it gentrification or any other name, the elimination of blight and the redevelopment of the middle class has served many other cities, some once poster children for crime, very well. New York City and Washington, DC are but two examples of

dramatic reductions in crime correlated more with increased income and property values than with specific changes in police practices.

Airing a constant barrage of negativity about Coatesville does not help. Cutting Coatesville off from public funding at County and state levels does not help. Removing public institutions such as elementary schools from Coatesville does not help. Refusal by the School District Board to co-operate on developer incentive programs does not help. It almost appears that the real agenda is to exploit Coatesville poverty statistics to get federal dollars to dole out in more affluent communities. Clearly, Coatesville deserves better treatment by other government entities.

- We are calling on the County to forthrightly develop a more equitable distribution of low income and broken homes throughout the County—beginning with a freeze on subsidized housing projects and Section 8 placements within Coatesville.
- For the County critics demanding more expenditure on police, send money to pay for the City's unfunded mandate of policing the County's criminal element at the expense of its citizens.
- A call for full coordination by all levels of government in the City's revitalization effort including the creation of county/state/federal fast-track action teams to cut through a stifling bureaucratic morass holding back revitalization projects.

Crime is an illness that attacks the rights of individuals. It adversely affects the quality of life of everybody in a community. It is symptomatic of spiritually empty individuals disconnected from society and their own reality. Coatesville will aggressively and unrelentingly bring to justice these unfortunates. And the City will continue to fight to give new life to its destiny as the civic center of Chester County.

Harry Walker
Coatesville City Manager, August 2008