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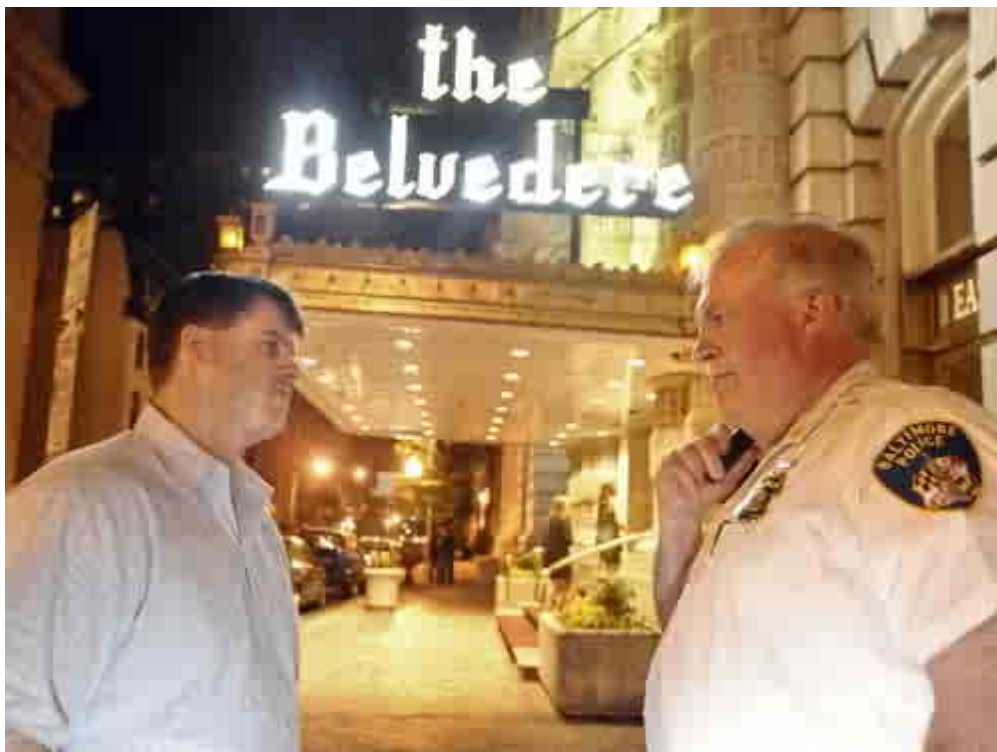
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Downtown gets riskier after dark

Tour finds more street crowds with nothing in particular to do

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Councilman William H. Cole IV and police Maj. John Bailey pause outside the Belvedere while checking the nighttime goings-on in Baltimore's Central District, where business diners and tourists may share sidewalks with roaming youths. (Baltimore Sun photo by Karl Merton Ferron / May 23, 2009)

The city is different after the sun sets. Edgier. More eclectic. More energized. More youthful. More dangerous.

Recent violence is either out of control, as some residents and visitors suggest, or it's an exaggerated, isolated byproduct of a vibrant after-hours social scene that takes over neighborhoods north of the Inner Harbor as most people are climbing into bed.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV spends many weekend nights cruising through his district, which includes some of the city's hottest clubs, most attractive tourist areas and historic

residential neighborhoods, from Federal Hill to Bolton Hill, with the Inner Harbor in between.

On a recent Saturday night into Sunday morning, Cole and the deputy director of the Parking Authority, Peter J. Collier, raced from bar to bar, fight to fight, cop call to cop call.

Any given night, teens and college kids packing bars and clubs mix with business people and visitors leaving steakhouses at the harbor, wedding parties share a lobby with an urban hip-hop club at the Belvedere and patrons seeking after-theater drinks mix with wide-eyed visitors to The Block. Couples strolling the waterfront promenade run headlong into packs of kids aimlessly roaming the streets.

"There's got to be a way for all this to coexist," said an exasperated Cole, standing in front of the Belvedere at Charles and Chase streets with a police commander, a community leader and the manager of Suite Ultralounge, which is in the basement and which the liquor board is trying to close.

On this night, there are only 60 kids at one of the underage events the club sponsors, and manager Louis Wood has promised police he would turn off the music by 11 so they can get out, find a bus and get home before the midnight curfew. Wood told Cole and police Maj. John Bailey that he's severed ties with one promoter and is phasing out the large underage dance nights, though it might be too little too late.

"He knows he's on thin ice," Bailey told the councilman. "He's very aware that he might lose everything."

Crowds downtown are not unusual, nor should they be discouraged. "What is unique now is that we have so many young people coming here with nothing to do," Cole says. "They aren't going to clubs. They aren't going to dinner, they're hanging out. And people with nothing to do get into trouble."

The tour with Cole and Collier showed a side of the city we too often only hear about thirdhand; after the bedlam has subsided, the only thing left are the stories. Gangs, hoodlums, people beaten at random and for no reason are how victims and witnesses describe the scenes. Unsupervised youths with nothing to do, picking fights and intimidating others has been how the cops describe the scenes.

In the past several months, people have been shot in front of the Belvedere, stabbed during a disturbance at the Inner Harbor that prompted restaurant owners to keep patrons inside, and others have been beaten on downtown streets for no apparent reason. On Thursday, a man was shot and killed near Oriole Park.

City officials have played down crime downtown for years to project a utopia-like, family-style brand, and the Inner Harbor and streets reaching north into Mount Vernon and Bolton Hill are still among the safest and best-policed areas in the city. But as evening turns into night and night turns into early morning, the atmosphere shifts - it's always noisy, frequently intimidating and sometimes violent.

During happy hour, patrons can sip a dry martini at the Belvedere; at night, it's "Takeova Teen Nite." By day, the Masons run a stately lodge in Bolton Hill; at night, it's turned into a "Summer Swag, Get Wet" party. On Sunday mornings, it's fresh broccoli rabe at the Farmers' Market under the JFX; the night before, it's the Maryland Deathfest VII concert series.

I visited Deathfest with Cole after bands such as Hail of Bullets, Napalm Death and Pig Destroyer had finished, and 2,000 pierced and decorated patrons were slowly leaving the fenced-off area outside Club Sonar on Saratoga Street. It looked like the infield at the Preakness, before the bring-your-own-beer-ban. Cole noted how peacefully the people left, though the police major had earlier sent a squad of cops to stop the patrons from throwing bottles.

Across the street at Club One, a hip-hop club where just a few months ago two people were shot outside, the guards in bullet-resistant vests carrying flex cuffs were patting down customers and keeping people from congregating. "Ladies and gentleman," one guard told a group, "If you're coming in, get in line, or you're going to have to leave."

Cole smiled. "It's much better," he said.

On Water Street, four cops paid overtime by the Parking Authority stood guard at the city-owned garage between Market Place and The Block. This is where a few weeks ago one man tried to shove another man's face through a metal grate and near where four Canadian naval officers were beaten.

City cops and other officials have a hard time on any given night keeping up with which clubs are hot and which clubs are not. "It's a moving target," Cole said.

Driving up Calvert Street, Cole and Collier noticed a club across the street from a hotel advertising after-hours drinking. Neither city official had heard of the spot before. "Looks like they put a sign at night and it's nothing during the day," Collier said, noting a line of illegally parked cars.

Cops later rushed to two fights, one at Gay and Saratoga streets, the other at Calvert and Redwood. "It's going to be a long summer," one of the cops told Cole, who then turned his sport utility vehicle onto Baltimore Street through The Block, only to be passed by two speeding police cars and a prisoner van on their way to another fight.

By 12:30 a.m., as they do on most weekend nights now, police shut down traffic on East Baltimore Street and on North Calvert Street from the Inner Harbor to the courthouses. "It's come to this," Cole noted. "To keep control, we have to shut down streets."

Cole ended his night driving through Federal Hill, ecstatic to find a parking enforcement officer writing tickets for illegally parked cars near where two men were shot and killed last year in front of half-million-dollar rowhouses (gang members, police said, using the park for meetings), and a police officer shooing away people gathered near the park to chat.

Cole rolled down his window and called the parking officer over to thank him. Realizing who Cole was, the officer quickly adjusted his loose tie, but Cole waved him off. The councilman was so happy that at 12:45 a.m., he called Maj. Scott Bloodsworth, who was out working the Southern District he commands, to deliver some good news - city workers were indeed doing their job.

Just as we called it a night, Collier got an e-mail from the cops working the Water Street garage. Police from three districts were speeding toward the harbor.

The message read: "Market Place is out of control."

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