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'Great day' for city kids brings 2 PAL closings

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To the city's recreation and parks director, Wanda S. Durden, news that her staff will take over Police Athletic League centers from the cops who have run them for 14 years, and shutter two more, marked a "great day" for Baltimore's youth, a day of expansion, a day "not to talk about closings but to talk about our future."

The cops will be gone and put back on patrol to fight crime, but otherwise not much will change, except, a smiling Durden told reporters, maybe a new coat of paint and counselors in khakis instead of police uniforms. She talked about "some more vibrant programming that we think will definitely touch everyone in Baltimore."

But outside the soon-to-be-closed Rosemont PAL center on North Rosedale Street in West Baltimore, kids milled about waiting for their two favorite policemen, ones they knew as Officers Jeffs and Branton, as angry parents began to arrive to determine whether the dire rumors were true.

"This keeps kids out of trouble," said Shiretta Henderson, worried about what to do with her 8-year-old son. "Where are they going to go if they can't come here?"

A budget crunch means making tough choices. And moving 24 police officers from running rec centers to working the street to strengthen a depleted patrol unit, lock up criminals and get a handle on a robbery problem might very well be the best use of resources in hard economic times.

You can argue now as people argued when the first PAL center opened in 1995 that cops should be in patrol cars and not baby-sitting kids. PAL was the brainchild of a former police commissioner, Thomas C. Frazier, dubbed a "social worker with a gun" who sent cops to take over failing rec centers overrun by crime and, in some cases, closed when the afternoon school bell sounded to keep out the drug dealers.

Yesterday, some of that old animosity emerged under the guise of moving forward. Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III stressed that beat cops should be spending a lot of time at recreation centers to get to know the kids, but he also talked of workers "staying in their lanes," meaning cops police and counselors run rec centers.

Durden said it more bluntly: "We don't want to waste officers' time on managing a recreation center. I need them hands-on with our youth, hands-on walking through the recreation centers, talking, engaging and establishing those kinds of relationships."

Bealefeld rightly noted that the Baltimore of 14 years ago is not the Baltimore of today, and what was a central part of the policing strategy then doesn't have to be a part of it now. With the takeover, rec and parks expands its inventory to 57 centers across the city and, as the city's top cop said, officers can "deploy to make neighborhoods safer."

But as stated earlier, yesterday was not a day to talk about making tough choices. To announce this shift, Durden joined Bealefeld, not at a PAL Center, but at the Mount Royal Recreation Center in Bolton Hill, where there were no angry children or worried parents or cops about to be moved.

But over at the Rosemont PAL, kids loitered on a dead-end street waiting for the cops to arrive and open the doors. A maintenance worker told me a community meeting was planned, but he wouldn't let me inside, saying City Hall "told everybody to shut up."

The head of the Rosemont Improvement Association, Robert Hunt, simply said he was "dumbfounded." A young boy stood near a trash bin and, asked what he would do when the doors opened, answered: "Play basketball." Asked what he will do when the center closes, he answered: "Nothing."

A spokesman for the recreation department called me after learning I had been to Rosemont to remind me that there are two centers nearby, one just eight-tenths of a mile away, another 1.7 miles away. That's more than an excursion for kids with parents who don't have cars and who have to traverse gang territory to get to a gym.

Henderson stood under a police floodlight and a blinking blue light of a surveillance camera and talked about how the police bonded with the kids, about how the cops "intervened in disputes and stopped fights," about how they kept kids off the drug corners, about the Christmas parties they threw.

It is a tough choice, one I'm sure the folks running the city wish they didn't have to make. But they shouldn't spin this as a great day for Baltimore. It's more than a new coat of paint and counselors dressed in different clothes. It's a change in how this city invests in programs for its youth.