

## Golden Gate Park crime largely unreported, say officials and residents

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Public safety on the west end of Golden Gate Park could be improved with more activity and brighter lighting, say officials and some neighborhood residents. But some park advocates are concerned about the impact of bright lighting on wildlife.

Golden Gate Park, that common backyard for all San Francisco, is a frequent site for vandalism, illegal dumping, theft, solicitation of sexual acts and illegal camping during the hours of darkness – plus, sometimes, more violent crimes visited largely on people engaged in those other illegal activities, according to police, parks officials and some neighborhood residents.

“I’ve grown increasingly afraid ... to bring my family to Golden Gate Park,” Greg Syler told a hearing of the Board of Supervisors’ City Operations and Neighborhood Services Committee on Monday. “As a citizen, I don’t want this park to decline to the point that I no longer want to use it.”

**Supervisor Carmen Chu**, who represents District 4 (primarily the Sunset and Parkside districts), called the hearing to discuss various park safety issues.

Syler is a member of the Friends of West Sunset Playground and the Neighborhood Parks Council, but he said his comments were not made on behalf of either group.

Capt. Richard Corriea of the Police Department’s Richmond Station – which patrols most of Golden Gate Park – said he didn’t have figures showing whether current crime rates are better or worse than previous years. But he expressed confidence that the problem is worse than any statistics would show.

That, he said, is because many of the victims of muggings, assaults and other violent crimes don't want to talk to the police because they are illegal campers, underage drinkers, or in the park for other illegal purposes.

"Many of the people we encounter in the park are not the ones who will be calling the police asking for help," Corriea said.

Recreation and Park Department General Manager Phil Ginsburg said that one measure that may help deter crime in the west end of the park, near Ocean Beach, is better lighting and increased use of the City's Beach Chalet soccer fields.

"We think improved activation and lighting at the Beach Chalet soccer fields is an important improvement for public safety," Ginsburg said.

But that brighter lighting is a glaring problem to Katherine Howard of the Golden Gate Park Preservation Alliance.

"Introducing stadium lighting is totally inappropriate," Howard told supervisors, citing concern for the possible impact on birds and animals in the area of unnaturally bright nights.

But the bigger question, Howard said, is how much development is appropriate for the park.

One close observer of the Outer Sunset neighborhood near the park, however, says that much of the west end of Golden Gate Park is so badly trampled and trashed by a continuous flow of people soliciting sex acts that it's hard to imagine lights making things any worse.

"There's wildlife in there, but it ain't animals," John Zwolinski of La Playa/Great Highway Neighborhood Watch said after the meeting. "I would love to see lighting, I would love to see positive use supplant the negative use."

Zwolinski echoed Corriea's comments about unreported crime, and said people in the park for illegal purposes, including "cruising," attract other people who seek to victimize them.

"If they get mugged, they're not going to say anything about it. ... That makes it a desirable place for other folks to come and prey on them," he said.

Monday's meeting came as Mayor Gavin Newsom is preparing legislation to close down Golden Gate Park – and perhaps other parks – at night. A parks official told the committee Monday that San Francisco is the only U.S. city of its size or larger that does not have a park curfew.

Zwolinski said that although he supports the idea of reducing camping in the park, he has little doubt about one impact of closing it at night.

"If they're more aggressive about moving RVs and campers out of the park, [the campers are] going to end up in our neighborhood," he said.

Zwonlinski said that after previous crackdowns on park camping on the east end of Golden Gate Park, he noticed more campers on the west end and in the Ocean Beach dunes west of the Great Highway.

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