



The Pearl

Civility collapses on North Park Blocks

BY ALLAN CLASSEN

Discontentment over lawless, disruptive and threatening behavior—often associated with but not necessarily linked to homelessness—around the North Park Blocks has reached new levels this summer.

Thoughts that it represents the usual cycle of complaints heard every summer are belied by photographs of drug users, clusters of camp sites and couples engaged in sexual intercourse in full public view during daylight hours—the latter a shocking revelation even to jaded Portlanders used to panhandling and camping on sidewalks.

“Our lovely park has become home to vagrants who openly do drugs, have sex, fight and regularly urinate and defecate in public,” said Michelle Cardinal, CEO of R2C Group, an ad agency in the Pearl employing 120 people.

“My employees and clients are verbally harassed and physically threatened when walking to and from our office,” Cardinal said. “Daily, we remove belligerent people aggressively blocking

the entrance to our building and sidestep groups of people erecting makeshift cardboard forts on our sidewalks. This is affecting my business and, more importantly, Portland’s prosperity in the long run.”

Cardinal’s views are posted on northparkblocks.org., a new interactive blog assembling complaints, photos, media reports and actions taken to address the problem.

In mid August, the website posted two photos of public sex.

“Last week, an intern was walking to their office on the North Park Blocks. On Northwest Flanders they encountered this couple. Mayor Hales and members of Portland City Council don’t get it,” a caption under one stated.

“Let’s simplify the situation for them—we don’t know the housing status of this couple, but we do know they are behaving badly.”

“I believe we’re close to a tipping point of anger and frustration,” said Stan Penkin, co-founder of Friendly Streets and a member of the Pearl District Neighborhood Association Livability Com-



Drug usage flourishes in the North Park Blocks. Photos of public sex, aggressive dogs, camping and litter are posted on northparkblocks.org

mittee. “Everyone I speak to is talking about the city being out of control.

“I lived through the dire conditions of New York City in the ’70s and see the same thing happening here to the city I have come to love,” he said. “It’s just very scary what’s happening in the city right now.”

Penkin said never felt intimidated on the streets until recently, when younger “road warriors” with aggressive, unleashed dogs began taking over public spaces.

“I have so much compassion for the truly homeless people,” he said, but they are not the problem.

Cardinal, Penkin and other concerned Pearl residents and business operators have been meeting with Mayor Charlie Hales and a team of city officials to develop solutions. Immediate steps included temporarily fencing off the Park Block between Burnside and Couch to reseed grass and a three-week ban on camping on sidewalks across from the park. After Labor Day, irriga-

tion in the Park Blocks will be turned on at 9 a.m. and midnight.

Penkin isn’t sure if those measures will help. He believes intense law enforcement is needed immediately while creative, long-range strategies are developed.

Another approach would be to schedule public events in the Park Blocks to keep the area animated and less attractive to anti-social congregants. ■