

OUTDOORS: Patrol helps clean up James River Park

Andy Thompson | Posted: Friday, May 6, 2011 1:00 am

I wrote a column in July 2009 calling for a police unit or task force dedicated to the James River Park. At the very least, I argued, the park "needs patrols, bike patrols, preferably, by officers capable of riding the trails between the Nickel Bridge and Belle Isle."

By November of that year, avid paddler, adventure racer and mountain biker Stacy Rogers was given that assignment by 3rd Precinct Capt. William Smith and Sector 312 Lt. John O'Kleasky.

Must be fans of the column, I figured.

Turns out my self-flattery was misplaced. Pride always goes before the fall, right?

Illegal activities in the parks were forcing the 3rd Precinct to devote significant resources to them, but, O'Kleasky said, "It's a unique area to police. Your typical police officer is going to have to drive up, park his car, walk down. He's not familiar with all the trails."

The results have been exactly as hoped. They found the right guy in Rogers and, in many ways, that area of the park has been transformed.

"In hindsight, it's a very easy decision," Smith said. "You look at the amount of effort that Stacy has personally put in, the amount of time he's put in and the impact that it's had in the overall crime rate, not only in the parks but in the surrounding neighborhoods. It's a very easy decision."

That's in hindsight. At the time, Smith wasn't sure about the decision.

"We were a little concerned that we were depleting our patrol staff a little too much," Smith said. "We were concerned we would not see the impact as quickly as we did."

That impact manifested itself almost immediately in both crime reduction in the area Rogers patrols on bike — Forest Hill Park and the James River Park from the Nickel Bridge to Belle Isle — and community support.

In the year since Rogers began focusing on the parks along Riverside Drive, break-ins at the Reedy Creek parking lot dropped 40 percent. On Belle Isle, where alcohol consumption, littering and drug use sometimes mar what should be an iconic destination for Richmonders and out-of-town visitors, Rogers has taken a hard-line approach.

His goal, he said, is to change "the landscape of things down here. I try to do that with very strict enforcement of the laws we have. If I give a guy a warning, he's happy with me for the day. If I give him a ticket that's going to cost him \$135, he might not like me very much, but chances are he's never

going to do that again, or at least think twice about doing it again."

That dollar total is for possession of alcohol in the park, plus court costs.

Rogers wrote 110 tickets last April. This year, he wrote about 70. His presence and diligence are paying off. It seems return users really are thinking twice.

"I'd like to have three or four Stacy Rogers down there in the parks interacting with folks," said O'Kleasky, now in charge of Homeland Security for Richmond Police. "From a community policing perspective, it was a real hit. That was the No. 1 thing citizens commented on, and, of course, they wanted to see more officers."

As Smith pointed out, the challenge always is to maximize effectiveness with limited resources.

The communities around the parks should be thankful for the progressive, proactive efforts by Smith, O'Kleasky and Rogers.

Some argue that police should be focused on violent crime, Rogers said. Parks issues often are seen as relatively minor, but this is about the broken-window theory of crime. When we allow alcohol, drug use, littering and generally boorish behavior in one of Richmond's top tourist attractions — the JRPS handles well more than 500,000 visitors a year — we invite worse.

People move to the city for these parks. Visitors laud Richmond for its urban wilderness.

The James is a gem that requires constant polishing. To neglect that is to grossly underestimate its value.

A parks police makes a statement: We know what we have along the James, and we want it to sparkle.