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Weekend protest leaves P'town split over reasons for incident

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PROVINCETOWN — After a week-end of arrests and demonstrations on Commercial Street, one selectman vowed that "we will be prepared" for future problems there.

"Police will be down there every night," said Selectman Delores deSouza. "We want to keep that street cleared."

An estimated 1,000 to 2,000 people Saturday night protested what some called aggressive police behavior early Saturday against a predominantly gay crowd gathered outside Spiritus Pizza, 190 Commercial St.

The police patrolled the area this weekend, at the request of selectmen responding to neighborhood noise complaints, and arrested nine people on various charges. State police joined local officers Saturday and Sunday nights.

Monday night and early yesterday morning, the typical late-night crowd was smaller than usual and the evening was fairly uneventful, said Police Chief James J. Meads.

Still, Spiritus closed 30 minutes earlier than the usual 2 a.m. Tuesday after a bomb threat was phoned in to the pizza shop, he said.

But owner John Yingling dismissed the threat, saying if he had been at the pizza parlor, "I would not have said anything to anybody."

In her two-year tenure as selectman, Ms. deSouza said, "never have I discussed something so often with different people. It has blown me away." Ms. deSouza, a Provincetown native, witnessed Saturday's protest.

"I felt such a stab when Hooked up Saturday and saw state police troop-

ers walking down Commercial Street," she said. "I put my head down and thought, 'I don't believe this.' I was glad they were there," she said, but shocked that a diverse town "that had lived in harmony" had reached such a breaking point.

Observers around town, from residents to town officials, disagree on whether this weekend's police actions were "anti-gay."

"It was not in any sense a gay issue," said Elizabeth "Betty" Steele, chairman of the selectmen. Spiritus has been a late-night gathering spot since it opened eight years ago, and residents have often asked the town to quell noise there, said Ms. Steele.

The selectmen discussed the issue Aug. 11 and decided to ask for a police patrol there, although that request was not reported by any of the local media, she said. Following an emergency session Saturday, the selectmen issued a request that businesses ask their patrons to cooperate in keeping Commercial Street clear for vehicle traffic.

Police timing, in the midst of Carnival Week's largely gay-oriented festivities, is "an ironic coincidence, at the minimum," said Paul Wychules, president of the local human rights coalition. Carnival Week, a Provincetown Business Guild-sponsored promotion, concludes tonight with a masquerade party.

Guild president and selectman Paul Christo could not be reached yesterday for comment.

Wychules said Meads "has his valid point to be reacting to feared violence," but called police measures to keep Commercial Street clear of traffic "draconian."

One 10-year resident said Satur-

day's demonstration was agitated by out-of-towners, and the police handled themselves well.

"None of the faces were familiar," said Beau Fillion, a local builder, describing the crowd gathered Saturday. "Sure, there were state police, and sure, there were dogs. But there were also a thousand people. . . . It was a very explosive situation."

"People come from out of town with their issues, and bring them here. They think they live in a police state, they think they're being harassed because they're gay — they're losing their apartments or jobs," said Ms. Fillion. "Those are not our issues."

"It's been an awkward summer," said Ms. Steele. "Business projections are off, and I think there are a lot of underlying tensions with people all the way around. It's too bad this added to it."

Ms. deSouza said, "This town has been bent on hysterics all summer." Between concern over a strict disposal limit at the dump, split opinions on whether Burger King should be allowed to open a franchise in town, and various other issues, "people have been hyper since February. I think everybody is looking for a cause."

This winter, she said, the town needs to decide how it will handle tourism in the future. This could include asking businesspeople to ask guests not to congregate in the street.

Ms. Steele and Ms. deSouza also said Christo was wrong this week when he said town taxpayers' money paid for state police patrols. The troopers were already working and paid out of the state budget, regardless of what town they were working in, they said.