

THE COMMITTEE ON UNIVERSITY & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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During the fall of 1989, the University at Albany and the City of Albany experienced an increase in the number and intensity of complaints concerning the behavior of college students off campus. These complaints came from concerned neighbors, neighborhood associations and the local police department. The complaints were a result of parties in off-campus apartments involving alcohol as well as traffic to and from area taverns. The problems reported involved the abuse of alcohol, yelling and screaming late at night, large and unruly parties, loud music at night and to a lesser degree trash and litter.

As a result of these problems, the then Mayor of the City of Albany and the President of the University at Albany formed the “**Task Force on University & Community Relations.**” This task force was composed of university and community members in a united effort to make recommendations for the problems identified. In the spring of 1990, the report of the task force was released and approved by both the Mayor of the City of Albany and the President of the University at Albany. This report included both proactive and reactive measures as part of a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to improve the situation in the neighborhoods where our off-campus students traditionally live. In addition, as the first recommendation of the task force, a permanent committee was established to both insure that the original recommendations would be implemented and additional initiatives would be

developed. As the then “Director of Off-Campus Housing,” I was asked to chair this committee - “**The Committee on University & Community Relations.**”

In the fall of 1990 the committee began to meet on a monthly basis with the original overall goal of **improving relations between college students off campus and their long term neighbors.** Since that time its goals have been expanded to include **improving safety off campus, developing alcohol and other drug prevention and education programs off-campus and improving the quality of life in neighborhoods off campus where college students reside.** The committee is currently composed of student leaders and professional staff from the University at Albany as well as other local colleges - specifically the College of Saint Rose, the Albany College of Pharmacy, the Albany Medical College, the Junior College of Albany/The Sage Colleges, Siena College and Hudson Valley Community College, officials from the Albany Police and Fire Departments as well as the Albany Common Council, neighborhood association representatives, community and religious leaders, tavern owners, landowners and representatives from the Empire State Restaurant and Tavern Association and the New York State Division of Alcohol Beverage Control. Membership is open to anybody who wishes to join.

The committee has been an excellent forum for open and honest interactions among all those attending who are not often seated at

the same table. As Henry M. Madej, committee member and past President of the Pine Hills Neighborhood Association, states: “The committee demonstrates that what seems to be the ‘tradition’ of increasing town-gown antagonism isn’t necessarily inevitable. The energy of both can, when combined, be effective in developing creative solutions to many common quality of life issues.” It has undertaken programs, among others, to educate landowners as well as students about expected tenant behavior, to inform college students about their rights and their responsibilities off campus, to deal effectively and in a timely manner with problems as they are reported, to help enforce local laws and ordinances regarding rental property and to methodically and cooperatively with the Albany Police Department and neighborhood associations log, identify and follow up on quality of life problems off campus. For example, to inform students living off campus about the various laws and ordinances impacted if they decide to host a party in their apartment, doortags entitled “Having a House Party? Don’t Add Getting Arrested to Your Checklist!” are distributed door-to-door in student neighborhoods a few days before students return to their apartments. In addition, the committee has developed several initiatives to educate students currently living on campus about local laws and ordinances as well as behavioral expectations off campus as a proactive measure.

Safety became paramount as a result of several incidents off campus a few years ago and has proven to be a unifying agent for both students and their long term neighbors. As a result a number of personal, property and fire safety initiatives were adopted by the committee. Safety continues to be a priority for the committee both in terms of reactive and proactive measures that have been enacted. Former Albany Police Chief

and former committee member Robert Wolfgang states:

“From the law enforcement standpoint, Albany’s Committee on University & Community Relations practiced community policing long before it became the popular thing for law enforcement to do. A group of concerned groups and individuals, each with a stake in the outcome and each able to impact on the problems to some extent, joined forces to identify quality of life and crime issues that needed attention. The group, many of whom were not communicating before, pooled their resources and developed and executed plans to address those problems. In doing so, they succeeded in improving the quality of life in the neighborhood, decreased criminal activity, opened up lines of communication between affected parties and created an improved level of understanding.”

Many of the incidents concerning inappropriate behavior off campus seemed to involve alcohol. As one initiative regarding the abuse of alcohol off campus, the "**Tavern Owner Advertisement Agreement**" program was initiated by the committee during the spring of 1995. The committee had discussed in length the issue of tavern advertising as it might impact the behavior of patrons, especially college students, while in a particular establishment and when they leave the premises. As a result, the committee arrived at a **voluntary Tavern Owner Advertisement Agreement**. Those tavern owners signing this document agreed to review the content of any and all advertising with the intention to promote: (1) the responsible and lawful consumption of alcoholic beverages and (2) appropriate as well as civil behavior when leaving their establishment. In addition they agreed to comply with current policies and procedures concerning the posting and distribution of advertisements for the City of Albany, the

University at Albany and The College of Saint Rose, copies of which are provided to the tavern owners with the agreement.

Specifically taverns that signed this agreement agreed to fashion their advertising to: (1) include a statement asking all patrons of their establishment to behave responsibly and in a civil manner in the surrounding neighborhood, (2) emphasize the necessity of being 21 years of age or older and possessing the appropriate valid means of identification to prove such, (3) avoid terminology which promotes the irresponsible consumption of alcoholic beverages, and (4) promote and advertise non-alcoholic beverage specials as much as alcoholic beverage specials. A copy of a "Cooperating Tavern" sign is provided for display to those taverns who sign this agreement. In addition a sheet of Cooperating Tavern logos are also provided for inclusion on their advertisements. This program is part of the cooperative effort with tavern owners located in the traditional student neighborhoods that the committee wants to foster to achieve its goals and also gain a better understanding of their perspective regarding these goals. As Michael Byron, owner of the "Washington Tavern," a popular student bar, states: "The Tavern Owner Advertisement Agreement is a good first step in promoting the responsible advertising of alcoholic beverages by taverns in the City of Albany."

Scott Wexler, Executive Director of the Empire State Restaurant and Tavern Association and committee member agrees. He says: "The Tavernowner Advertisement Agreement provides sensible voluntary guidelines for businesses to follow and enables them to become part of the solution rather than part of the problem."

A "team" of representatives from the committee and I met with tavernowners who

own establishments college students frequented and/or were members of our committee inviting them to join this program by signing the advertisement agreement. Most tavern owners we contacted agreed to sign the agreement. We are monitoring compliance with the agreement and dealing with any alleged violations by these "Cooperating Taverns." Additional tavern owners are being asked to join this program as they are identified. Currently fourteen tavern owners representing sixteen taverns have signed and abide by this voluntary advertisement agreement.

To date there have been some violations of the agreement by some taverns, but generally all tavern owners who have signed have made changes in their advertisements to comply with this voluntary agreement. In addition, communication between tavern owners and members of the Committee on University and Community Relations has been greatly increased. This has resulted in other cooperative efforts between all parties involved as other problems and issues involving the consumption of alcohol by college students are identified.

Although the committee does not have all the answers concerning improving town-gown relations, making life safer off campus, dealing with underage drinking and the abuse of alcohol by college-age students and improving the quality of life in neighborhoods off campus where college students reside, we do feel that over the past eighteen years we have devised several proactive and reactive programs that have been effective to date in dealing with these challenges in our college communities.

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