
MELEE IN THE MALL

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

This problem solving project addresses civil disorder in Tallahassee, Florida, which is the state capitol and home to two large state universities. The descriptions on paper do not accurately portray the horror that resulted during the near riot conditions at a local shopping mall during a Homecoming football weekend. Local leaders were horror struck upon viewing the video tapes from security cameras. The shopping mall had been a traditional stop for families following the game, but over the years had evolved into another "spring break" for young people seeking to party. Unfortunately, honest fun presented an opportunity for some thugs in the crowd to create chaos and near riot stampedes throughout the mall. As thousands ran for safety from perceived gunfire and danger, these thugs hid in the crowds and rushed department stores to loot high priced clothes. There were no easy answers to the problem.

THE SARA MODEL

S	A	R	A
Scanning	Analysis	Response	Assessment
Identify neighborhood crime and disorder problems.	Understand conditions that cause problems to occur.	Develop and Implement solutions that work.	Determine the impact of the problem solving strategies.

Scanning:

- o A small group *took advantage of crowds reacting to* disturbances by stealing from stores

"Melee in the Mall" ————— 2000 SARA Problem Solving Project
Tallahassee Police Department

- A Mardi Gras atmosphere with intoxicated and disorderly behavior was evident
- Advertisements describing the mall as the "official after party location" caused overcrowding and disruptive behavior

Analysis:

- Videotapes and intelligence indicated that several small groups assessed theft locations and security staffing
- Offenders had no ties to the community or the event
- Merely increasing law enforcement presence did not control the problems
- Negative commentary in the media and within the community created a divisiveness

Response:

- Community based problem solving strategies
 - *Formation of a Large Events Committee*
 - *Mall greeters comprised of community members*
- Use of CPTED strategies
 - *Changed the flow of traffic inside the mall*
 - *Controlled the ability to interact between floor levels*
 - *Created a safe environment both inside and outside*
- Police operational planning
 - Layered staffing deployment
 - *Specific task assignments deterred previous problems*

Assessment:

- Theft rate dropped to zero
- Informal inquiry of patrons by mall staff and greeters indicated slight inconveniences

- Lack of disruptive behavior in the mall and parking areas
- Positive media coverage

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Problems caused by large, disorderly crowds congregating at Governor's Square Mall have improved significantly. When faced with such difficult social issues, it is paramount that the community work together to demonstrate our resolve for effective solutions. The police cannot do it alone. Through the support of our elected officials, citizens, educational institutions, and businesses, we can solve the obstacles and problems that challenge our city.



GROUND ZERO FOR SARA

Mall Food Court Area

Take notice of the second floor pedestrian walkways and the center atrium

**"Melee in the Mall"
2000 SARA Problem Solving Project
Goldstein Award Proposal**

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INTRODUCTION

The community of Tallahassee is located in northwest Florida amid rolling hills and an abundance of beautiful, canopy oak trees. As the state capital, Tallahassee remains abuzz with political activities, but the true spirit of the community lies within the sports and cultural events associated with the local colleges. The Florida State University (FSU), Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), and Tallahassee Community College (TCC) collectively attract nearly 60,000 students to the community, representing one-third of the overall population.

The presence of such a large college student population presents certain challenges for law enforcement agencies. A police department in a college town routinely confronts late night bar crowds, alcohol fueled misbehavior, unruly loud parties, and other forms of misguided conduct. In Tallahassee, the additional challenges include the problems associated with highly successful college sports programs, equally extensive party reputations, and an ever-increasing draw of visitors to the community for large events. On occasions, these large events can take on a life of their own with disastrous results. Such was the case in the fall of 1997 and 1998 at a local shopping mall, when a football celebration led to chaos and looting.

Governor's Square Mall, the largest shopping mall in Tallahassee, has increasingly become a popular site for young people seeking to socialize together. In particular, the celebration of the FAMU Homecoming Week has brought upwards of 4000-6000 patrons to the mall food court on the Saturday following the afternoon football game. Unfortunately, during the past several years, the celebrating crowds have grown significantly in size, along with more disruptive and belligerent behavior.

In 1997 and 1998, the ingredients of partying young people, oversized crowds, and belligerent behavior culminated in disaster inside the mall. In both instances, the eruption of an altercation was followed by metal trash cans striking the tile floor, mimicking the sound of gunfire. What followed was sheer crowd panic as some 4,000-6,000 patrons scattered in fear, and others in the crowd rushed into department stores to loot the higher priced clothing merchandise sections of some department stores. In the end, there were several injured persons, criminal arrests, and the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars in merchandise from mall department stores. The media and community responded quickly to the reported "Melee in the Mall" by demanding immediate action to avert a repeat of the disaster.

- **What is a Problem?** -----
- Two or more incidents,
 - Similar in nature,
 - Capable of causing harm, and
 - Public expectations to do something about it.

Words do not adequately portray the picture of thousands of frightened patrons running for safety as others utterly "gut" the department stores. Police and community leaders are left horror stricken after viewing much of the activity that has been captured on security cameras.

The remainder of this Problem Oriented Policing (POP) document contains an overview of the response to this volatile situation by the Tallahassee Police Department, which utilized the SARA Concepts of Problem Solving to successfully solve the problem.

SCANNING

Governor's Square Mall is located within close proximity to the university campuses. With its two-tier glass atrium design, a centrally located open-air food court and centralized pedestrian movement platforms, the mall serves as an appealing location for large crowds. The three spacious wings, each anchored by a large major department store, provide shoppers with a variety of retail stores and an abundance of parking can be found on the mall property.



Mali Food Court and Center Atrium areas

Thousands of Patrons would fill both levels during the event

In the mid 1990's, crowds of 400-500 patrons came to the mall to dine and celebrate with fellow alumni following the FAMU Homecoming football game. Those in attendance were mostly comprised of students and college alumni who fostered strong affiliations to the university and the community. The growing traditional event was always a festive occasion with a fun and family oriented theme.

With the passing of years, however, it became apparent that the family crowds with university affiliations were giving way to a significant presence of young people who were merely seeking the opportunity for a "spring break" type atmosphere. The transition from an alumni celebration of 400-500 persons into a social "partying" event of 4,000-6,000 persons led to disaster.

In 1997, a small disturbance in the crowd unfolded in the food court, resulting in several metal chairs impacting the tile floor. The impact of the chairs hitting the tile floor mimicked the sound of gunfire and the crowd reacted in panic. As thousands of people ran towards the mall exits, small groups of people suddenly rushed the first and second floor mall entrances of a large department store. This resulted in uncontrolled looting when the group stormed into the popular designer fashion sections and fled with over twenty thousand dollars in clothing merchandise. The small contingent of police officers providing security to the mall arrived in the department store to find suspects wildly stealing clothes and running into the parking lot. The looting appeared to be a spontaneous opportunity by individuals who concealed themselves within the pandemonium of the panicked crowd.

A November 9th, 1997, article in the *Tallahassee Democrat* captured the essence of the trouble at the mall. "(I) jumped behind the escalator when the crowd headed towards (us). At first I thought it was a gunfight. Usually people run like that, somebody pulled out a gun", Ned English said. "There was a stampede of people running towards us", said Dave Furie, 28, a Garnet and Gold store employee.

By 1998, the size of the mall crowd had grown to 5,000-6,000 and the mood had more fully evolved into the "spring break party" atmosphere. The security for the event had been increased to meet the demands of the anticipated larger crowds.

However, no level of planning or staffing could have contained the resulting widespread pandemonium that transpired following a repeat of the previous year.

In the evening following the 1998 homecoming football game, a young lady was verbally accosted by a group of men who chanted obscenities when the woman spurned their advances. The brief disturbance quickly attracted an audience who rushed to the food court area to watch and yell with others. Officers clearing up the disturbance found themselves peppered with drinks and food that had been thrown from the second floor railings. Minutes later, a group yelled loudly on the opposite side of the food court, which drew the attention of the crowd that rushed there to watch the frenzy. In the chaos, there were chairs and trash cans thrown to the floor, creating the gunfire sounds. As if almost on cue, approximately 100 people suddenly surged forward and rushed into a department store where massive looting resulted in property losses totaling over one hundred thousand dollars in merchandise. The suspect groups were larger than the previous year and appeared to result from some rudimentary level of planning. Officers discovered suspects stealing clothes, display items, and even display racks in a wild frenzy that led into the parking lots. The limited number of arrests was a result of the limited number of available officers.

The media coverage in 1998 had now labeled the mall problems *the "Mall Melee" in the October 13th, 1998 article for the Tallahassee Democrat*. The article went on to describe the scene, "Take one free place to hang out, add several thousand people in high spirits, mix in a few troublemakers then press them together...the result?...A volatile mix that exploded into pandemonium in the food court Saturday night, sending panicked shoppers running for safety while others took the opportunity to steal high priced designer clothes as they rushed out the doors of one department store".

Tallahassee Police Chief Walt McNeil responded in the newspaper article by stating "This is a community issue. FAMU Homecoming is a super event...and basically very wholesome. There is a need for additional structured events that offer alternatives after the game. We're very optimistic that we can brainstorm and come up with some things". On the following Monday morning the brainstorming began with the use of the SARA model.

ANALYSIS

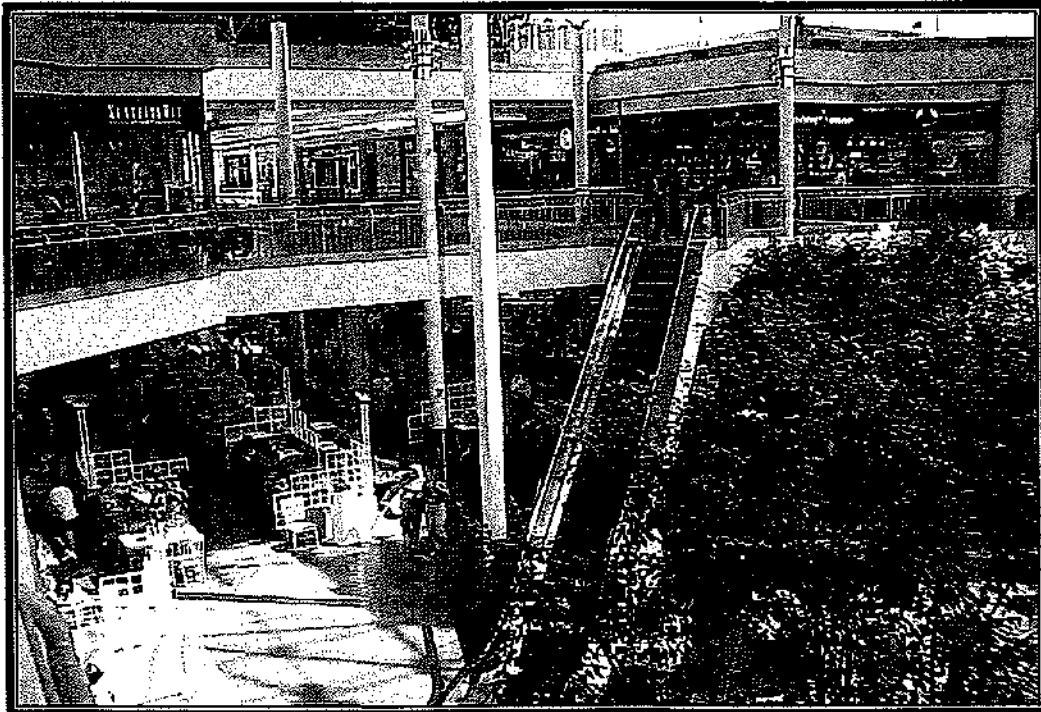
A tradition of celebrating a college homecoming football victory at a local mall has evolved from a small, family oriented event into an out-of-control "spring break" party, resulting in thousands of frenzied patrons and a small group of thugs seizing an opportunity to loot department store racks of higher priced merchandise. A plan of action with comprehensive solutions will be necessary to bring control to the chaos of the event.

9. WHAT WENT WRONG

After closely reviewing the results of these events and meeting with community stakeholders, the following observations were made:

- Ⓜ A lack of alternative events after the homecoming football game has contributed to the increasing attendance and resulting congestion at the mall.
- . There has been a noticeable evolution from family atmosphere to "party" atmosphere at the mall.
- o Unofficial web *sites and* advertisements promoted a "*Spring Break*" and "*Mardi Gras*" atmosphere to visitors at the mall.
- . The transition to a party atmosphere included the presence of alcohol, wide use of videotaping, flaunting of flashy clothes, and exhibition of loud, shiny cars and wild animals, such **as snakes**.

- The "flash point" initiating the widespread panic of the crowd inside the mall appeared to be accidental in the first year and orchestrated in the following year.
- An examination of intelligence information after the events revealed plans for mass looting at future events by bragging, gang affiliated criminals.
- There was an underutilization of preventative measures in the preparations for these events.



Center atrium and Food Court areas
Standing room only in these areas during the event

2. WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED

- Closing the mall was not an option. The corporate owners, widely criticized for closing a Central Florida mall, have ruled out this option and local community stakeholders have also not supported this option.
- The traditional gathering at the mall will continue to grow in the coming years.

- The successful infliction of chaos in previous years has opened the opportunity for the anticipation of "copycat" looting.
- The response to the dilemma must be comprehensive, involving a cross section of community stakeholders.
- The "Melee at the Mall" has placed this event center stage for the media and the community who will be monitoring the appropriateness of the response.

RESPONSE

Problems experienced in past years clearly indicated the need for a response that was both definitive and comprehensive. Members of the community were very vocal in their demands for a response that was representative of Tallahassee, a recently named "All America City." The closure of the mall, while demanded by some, was neither a viable option nor an appropriate course of action for resolving this dilemma. The summary analysis of the past problems at these events revealed several key points that served to define the response objectives.

- The significant size of the mostly cooperative crowd offered these subjects a level of anonymous freedom to act without accountability.
- Environmental conditions within the mall property were ideal for alterations that would enhance the operational effectiveness of the response.
- Implementation of community-wide problem solving techniques would greatly assist in the successful conclusion of this event.
- Implementation of articulate and comprehensive operational plans encompassing both traditional and non-traditional techniques would greatly enhance the safety at the event.

Within weeks of the most recent violence at the mall, the police department took the lead role in the development of the response objectives for the next year's

activities. The stakeholders for this event involved members of law enforcement, city government, community leaders, university leaders, and members of the corporate mall management. The response objectives represented essentially three broad categories:

1. Community Based Problem Solving Strategies
2. CPTED and Alternative Strategies
3. Police Operational Planning

In preparation for the completion of the Community Based Problem Solving Strategies, the police department and city government leaders came together to involve community and university leaders in developing response plans.

- ® The first step was the development of the Large Event Planning Committee, chaired by City Commissioner Charles Billings and Police Chief Walter McNeil. The objective of the committee was to involve city government and university organizations in the development of alternative events for the large numbers of visitors to the city. This was a critical component in the overall response, as the availability of alternative events would ultimately reduce the impact of the crowd at the mall.
- ® The next step was to research a mechanism to involve members of the community in the actual event at the mall. Removal of anonymity among crowd members and implementation of positive peer pressure were considered an important component of maintaining a peaceful environment. A "Community Host Program" was devised that involved members of the community and university student leaders. The community hosts received specialized training in conflict resolution and were provided readily identifiable apparel and cellular phones. These hosts were stationed at the entry doors to greet incoming patrons to the

mall. They responded to questions and provided positive peer pressure for conformance to rules of conduct and behavior.

In a problem solving initiative, the university added additional on-campus events as part of homecoming week in an effort to provide students with an alternative to the mall.

In addressing the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) and Alternative Strategies, the police department undertook the role of identifying and implementing a proactive strategy that would alter the actual environment for the event.

In preparation for the event, the crime prevention officers undertook an intensive review of the event based on operational after action reports, videotaped footage of the event, and an on-site assessment of the mall property. The objective was to define potential applications of CPTED techniques in the reduction of problems related to the crowds. The review yielded several practical applications that would result in low impact alterations to the environment.

1. The primary point of concern or "flash point" involved a second floor walkway with a balcony overlooking the food atrium area. In the past, this flash point area had resulted in patrons throwing items into the food court area and persons yelling to others below in a "Mardi Gras" type atmosphere.

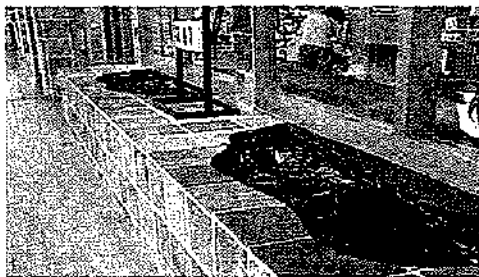
In order to counteract this problem, the mall management utilized a police recommendation to install a 6-foot high vinyl sight barrier, completely enclosing the atrium area and thus eliminating the view from the second floor.



View of Food Court area up to second level

Vinyl Barrier obstructs visibility from both levels improving safety

2. The metal trash cans, which had previously been thrown to create the gunfire sounds, were replaced with cardboard bins and emptied frequently during the event. Creating a clean atmosphere was also an important objective.
3. The most congested areas for pedestrian traffic were posted with "Rules of Conduct" signs as a reference for mall patrons.
4. The potential for thrown projectiles was eliminated with the removal of decorative rocks from the storefronts and the restriction of glass drinking containers.



decorative rocks from the storefronts and the restriction of glass drinking containers.

- The next area of concern was the second floor flow of pedestrian traffic in and around the food court atrium. This second floor railing had historically

resulted in severe congestion as patrons stopped in groups to yell at others on the first floor. In order to alter this traffic flow, a plan was devised to re-route the pedestrian flow from the center food court area into a wider pattern.

1. The design of the second floor walkways above the food court area included three pedestrian "bridges" that when blocked would effectively force all pedestrians into a wider traffic pattern. The importance of this action was to reduce the continual congestion of patrons "grouping up" to yell to others on the first floor.



Upper Level Pedestrian Bridges with signage

These areas would be blocked with barriers fo alter pedestrian traffic flow from the center to the outer wings of the mall thus reducing congestion

2. The second key component to altering the flow of pedestrian traffic on the second floor was to spread out the congestion. The location of a centrally located down escalator offered a unique opportunity to accomplish this task. The closure of this down escalator required

patrons to walk from the center area into one of three mall wings in order to gain access to the first floor. The importance of this action was that the congestion was effectively spread out from the center into three directions with no compromise in safety.

The utilization of Police Operational Planning resulted in the implementation of articulate and comprehensive plans for this large event. The police department developed an Operations Plan for the event, utilizing a variety of law enforcement units to ensure the successful completion of the mission.

- The police department strategy utilized a layered approach to the deployment of law enforcement officers. The first layer consisted of police officers and sheriffs deputies patrolling the outer traffic ways and parking areas and enforcing reckless/disruptive driving behaviors - particularly loud stereo music from cars.
- The Community Oriented Policing units were deployed on mountain bikes to patrol the parking lots to eliminate drunk and disorderly behavior. Officers maintained a level of high visibility for arriving patrons and were able to prevent potential problems by their mere presence.
- The community hosts and mall security officers were deployed near mall entry doors to greet incoming patrons and respond to questions. The involvement of student and community leaders assisted in portraying a positive community atmosphere for patrons.
- Police officers were paired with sheriffs deputies to patrol inside corridors and food court areas of the mall. The paired assignments assisted greatly in high visibility and ensured simplicity of communications in cases of emergencies.
- In preparation for any physical altercations inside the mall, a squad of tactical officers was assembled to provide a rapid response. The tactical squad was positioned in the mall office areas where it could utilize

maintenance hallways to quickly access the problem area and remove the troublemakers.

The deployment of two video teams in the mall was also an essential element in reducing this "Mardi Gras" atmosphere. Patrons with disruptive and uncontrolled behavior quickly calmed down upon the sight of the videographer.

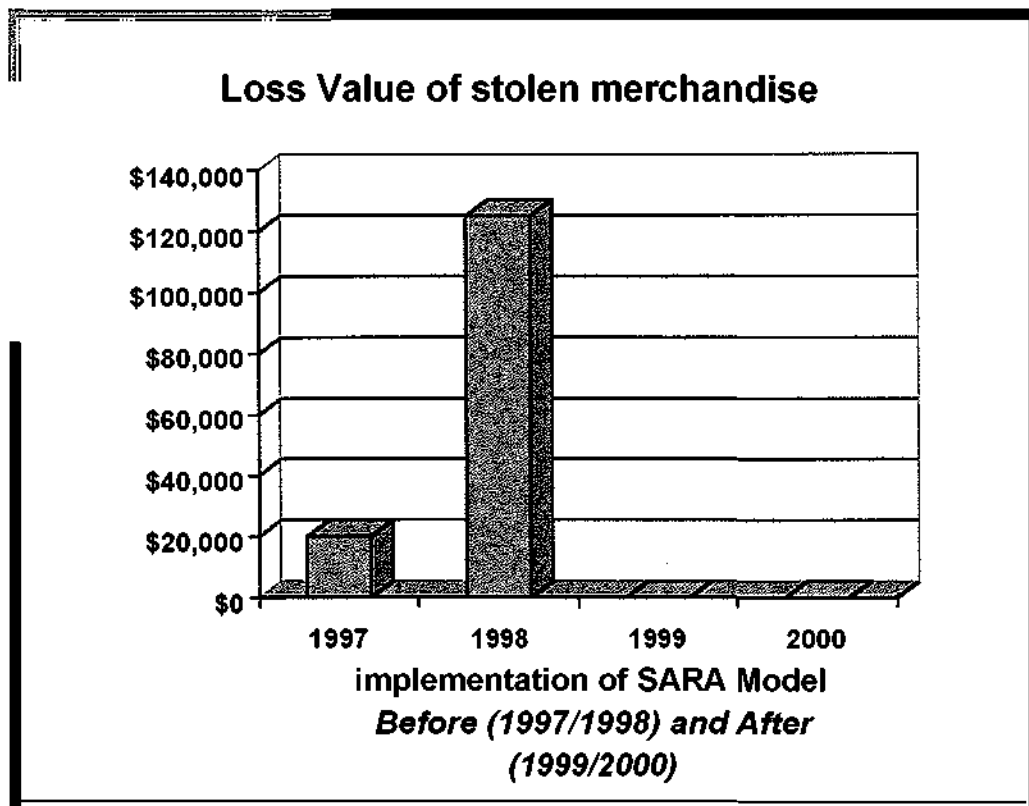
- s *A Command Post Area for the event was established on the second floor above the food court area where the event coordinator and incident commanders could easily view the activities within the mall. This area was closed off to the public and offered the Event Coordinator an ideal location from which to direct officers to any brewing hot spot within the large crowd.*

ASSESSMENT

The ultimate mission of this problem solving strategy was to provide a safe and secure environment for mall patrons, since the event no doubt would continue to be a traditional stopping point during the festivities of future homecoming weekends. Upon the completion of the event our next course of action was to assess the overall performance of our problem solving strategies.

During the assessment of this problem solving strategy, various methods were utilized to measure the level of success.

1. One of the primary measurements utilized upon the completion of this problem solving strategy was the reported theft rate. In the two previous years, the reported shoplifting and theft rate had skyrocketed during this event. In 1997, the level of theft totaled \$20,000.00, and in 1998, the same rate jumped to \$125,000.00 as a result of these looting activities. Upon the implementation of these problem solving strategies, the reported theft rate was reduced to zero.



2. In the evaluation of the CPTED strategies, there were concerns regarding the potential perceptions of the mall patrons. In particular, these were the placement of the sight barrier above the food court area and the blockage of both the "pedestrian bridges" and the down escalator. Officers and community hosts were directed to make informal inquiries of mall patrons. During our debriefing sessions, we were pleased to learn that there were very few negative comments or even inquiries made regarding these changes. The patrons who did make comments only disputed the inconveniences caused by the changes. These low impact CPTED changes were clearly a tremendous success, as they significantly altered the traffic patterns in a low impact manner.
3. In the overall evaluation of the application of these problem solving strategies, the lack of disruptive or criminal behavior provided a clear

picture as to the success of our efforts. These strategies have been implemented in both 1999 and 2000 with significant successful results, which served as tremendous verification as to the effectiveness of the problem solving strategy and operations plan.

4. In the period since the implementation of the strategies, both the media *coverage and public commentary have been complimentary of these efforts.* Following the implementation of these strategies, the "Melee in the Mall" on page one moved to one paragraph on page six in the local newspaper.

"Mall trouble fails to show" was the headline for the Octoberst 31 1999 article in the *Tallahassee Democrat*, which went on to describe the collaborative efforts of the stakeholders. "We're just waiting for the violence to start" a store clerk joked for the article, but the reporter described a scene where "...the college-age crowd did not seem interested in trouble...".

While the application of the problem solving strategies was very successful for the problems at the mall, there was also concern regarding potential displacement to other areas. In particular, another popular mall within in the city offered a similar opportunity for unruly behavior. A similar problem solving approach, yet on a smaller scale, was undertaken and applied to this facility in case of the displacement.

The final phase of our assessment involved an evaluation as to the necessity for the continued monitoring of this site for future problems. In response, we experimented with a more streamlined plan of action during our second year of implementation. It was determined that some level of monitoring would be essential as long as the venue continues to attract large crowds during the homecoming weekend. Each year our department command staff will evaluate

There were additional resources for the successful implementation of this plan. One of these was the provision of beverages and food for officers who worked long shifts following the completion of this event. Many officers worked 12-hour shifts because of the level of activity throughout the city during this football weekend. The corporate managers at the mall voluntarily provided food and beverages to officers who needed to eat dinner at the mall before moving onto their next assignment.

• **Obstacles Encountered**

It was vital that lines of communication between local law enforcement agencies, government entities, university leaders, student organizations, community groups, and the media remained open throughout all planning stages. At one point, student organizations openly complained in the media and alluded to a possible boycott for perceived injustices in treatment. These concerns were quickly resolved through these open communications.

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