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TIME FOR CITY HALL TO FIGHT GANGS, COUNCIL COMMITTEE HEAD ARGUES

by **JENNIFER O'BRIEN, FREE PRESS REPORTER**

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It's time for city hall to join the fight against London's youth gangs, a city councillor says. Coun. Susan Eagle plans to bring up gang activity at the next meeting of council's Community and Protective Services Committee.

"We have responsibilities here and I want to know what more we can be doing to deal with [gangs], beyond what is already being done," said Eagle, who chairs the committee. "I want to hear from police what we can do about this, and the whole area of recreation and community services is on the agenda too."

The city has taken steps toward improving community services, said Eagle, hiring a consultant to design a parks and recreation master plan. The plan – set for public discussion in September – takes into account a number of earlier city studies into such specific needs as hockey rinks, soccer pitches, ball programs and aquatic facilities. Eagle hopes the plan includes more community services aimed at youths attracted to gangs, but said she is concerned about funding.

Community services and youth programs play a key role in keeping youth gangs from forming, a U.S. expert said. "You need to think about prevention, and that means you need to develop programs with positive activities, especially for young kids," said Lisa Taylor-Austin, a Connecticut-based gang expert. She commended two London police programs – Rookie League baseball and Joe League basketball – for kids living in public housing.

As many as 12 youth gangs operate in London, police say. The issue came to light July 3 when a group of males wearing blue bandanas swarmed and viciously assaulted two men who lived in a Marconi Boulevard housing complex. Police arrested five males, all identified as members of a gang calling itself Vatos Locos – an Hispanic-only group of Crips.

Police have since acknowledged London is home to several more gangs using names such as Crips, Bloods and Native Posse. Like the Vatos Locos, the youths often identify themselves through bandana colours, police said.

Taylor-Austin said it's important to take youth gangs seriously and warned youths involved with loosely organized gangs such as those found in London are "like proverbial loose cannons." She said they are "just as dangerous and more dangerous" than structured gangs.

"Kids who say, 'Let's call ourselves Vatos Locos or Bloods or Crips' make up their own rules as they go along," she said. "The community has a tendency to pooh-pooh the situation and dismiss it ... a form of denial," she said. "It's smarter to crack down on it early than to wait until it gets out of control."

Taylor-Austin said a ban on bandanas and other gang-related clothing in Thames Valley District secondary schools sends a message gangs won't be tolerated. Allowing gang-related clothing sets the stage for confrontations, "because if one kid walks into school with a red bandana and the next kid walks in with a blue bandana and says something disrespectful, you've got a confrontation that can turn deadly in 10 seconds," she said.

Controller Russ Monteith said the city should consider the gangs a serious problem. "Unfortunately, it will cost us money to deal with the problem, but we shouldn't take the problem lightly," he said.

Eagle plans to address the issue at a July 29 meeting.



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