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Nine arrests in Provincetown split community

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Contributing Reporter

PROVINCETOWN - The arrests over the past three days of nine persons and the demonstration of 1,000 people on their behalf threatens to polarize this small Cape Cod community, long popular with gays and lesbians.

The arrests took place outside a pizza shop known as a late night social stop for homosexuals.

Neighbors who submitted complaints to selectmen support the arrests, saying early morning patrons of Spiritus Pizza keep them awake with noise and drunken behavior.

But many members and supporters of the gay community say noise levels outside the pizza shop are no worse than elsewhere and that the police action represents a veiled attempt to lash out at the town's large summer gay community.

Police arrested six persons out-

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side Spiritus early Saturday, charging them with rude and disorderly behavior and obstructing traffic, Provincetown Police chief James J. Meads said. Almost 100 people were in or near the shop at the time, he said.

The following night, more than 1,000 people gathered at Spiritus to protest the arrests, according to Meads. He said rumors of violence spread through the town so he

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sent in 10 state troopers and two police dogs.

"The crowd got unruly," Meads said. "They were blocking both sides of the sidewalk, singing and chanting and yelling obscenities." Police then arrested two persons for disorderly conduct and one more early yesterday on similar charges, when a crowd of about 500 gathered.

During the summer, tensions have always been greater here because the population, 4,000 during the year, explodes to 30,000, according to Meads.

Yesterday, spokespersons for the gay community said the police

presence was excessive and served only to spark hostility.

Tom Wilson Weinberg, who works in town as a composer, circulated a letter Saturday protesting the arrests and supporting the Saturday night demonstration. "Many people [at Spiritus] felt the police provoked the situation," Weinberg wrote in the letter.

Town buzzing over events

As rain came down in torrents yesterday, there were few people near Spiritus or on the streets. But inside shops that cater to tourists, the events of the weekend were the topic of heated discussion.

"I think the police action was a veiled attempt to target the gay community," said Jon Hampson, 25, from New Haven, who is spending his first summer here. "All of a sudden, there's been a sudden backlash against us," he said.

Meads, however, explained that selectmen have been discussing residents' complaints over the last few weeks. He said that at a meeting Aug. 11, which he attended, it was decided that police would be sent to Spiritus on Friday night.

"What the citizens were complaining to the selectmen about was noise, debris, people throwing up on their picnic tables," Meads said.

Meads, a Provincetown native who has been on the police department for 26 years and served as chief for 16, said the size of the demonstration Sunday morning was unprecedented.

Spiritus is located near the heart of Provincetown on Commercial Street near the corner of Carver Street. It is an area dense with shops and apartments. White clapboard dwellings, many of them converted into condos, line tiny side streets.

"... it's the noise"

A 63-year-old woman who has lived on Carver Street for 34 years was one of those who lodged the complaint. Yesterday, she sat at her kitchen table and explained why she is upset.

"When it comes to be about 1 o'clock in the morning, you can't get any sleep around here. I have nothing against the gays, don't get me wrong, it's the noise," she said.

"If they lived here, I don't think they'd go as far as they go. They are only tourists. They don't care who lives here," said the woman, who asked her name not be used.

Other residents complained that visitors have made sexual advances at local children, Meads said.

Last weekend's events occurred in what many gay activists call an atmosphere of violence against the gay community. Nine gays were assaulted over the last three months, according to Meads.

Many activists, including Weinberg, said police have not been aggressive enough in pursuing the attackers. Meads denies this, saying six of the nine attackers will be facing charges. Victims have dropped charges in the other cases.

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