

No easy solution to police parking problem

It would be easy to mistake the block of 21st Street that is home to the 13th Precinct as a police parking lot. It is continually lined with police vehicles and officers' private cars, which are sometimes double-parked and blocking fire hydrants and crosswalks.

The question is: Is there really anything 13th Precinct officials can do about the problem, which has had residents and motorists

fighting mad for years?

There are, after all, more than 500 police officials who work in the 13th Precinct station house. Many of them drive to work and have police cars waiting for them when they get there. You do the math.

Newly appointed Department of Transportation Commissioner Christopher Lynn isn't interested in these kinds of figures, however. He's concerned with the number of complaints from residents who not only find it unfair that only city-owned vehicles are legally allowed to park on the block between Second and Third avenues, but that officers' sloppy parking habits make it impossible for them to have access to anyplace close to their front doors.

"God forbid an ambulance has to come get you," said one 12-year resident of the block. "But that's just the worst-case scenario. Some-

thing as simple as unloading groceries or picking up an elderly relative is a nightmare when there isn't an inch of curb to be found."

EAST SIDE STORIES



Nelson Williams Jr.

It was these kinds of sentiments that led Lynn, a crusader who revolutionized the Taxi and Limousine Commission before transferring to the DOT, to make an unprecedented appearance at the 13th Precinct recently. His walking tour with Captain Steven Anger and Community Affairs Officer Owen Hughes resulted in what DOT spokesman Patrick Muldowney described as "a very happy agreement."

"There will be no more double-parking and, generally, more consideration for residents," Muldowney said. "For the police, it was a case of needing to get poked in

the eye to realize there was a problem there."

Anger, meanwhile, said that the 13th Precinct has tried to "accommodate residents and delivery people" all along, and that he wouldn't characterize the meeting as one that produced "any clear-cut agreement."

The commanding officer does admit that the block is a parking nightmare.

"It's a difficult situation," he said, "but the street is passable most of the time."

According to residents several blocks from the station house, the 13th Precinct has, over time and after much community prodding, been broken of some bad habits.

A year ago, police vehicles would reportedly sit for up to six weeks at a time in front of 45 Gramercy Park North, many times next to a fire hydrant, residents said. Elderly tenants in 39 Gramercy Park North were denied direct access to their building by cop cars habitually parked out front.

Len Harbor, a resident of 45 Gramercy Park North, was worried that neighborhood children were "being taught that it was all right for police to break the law." Marge English, of 39 Gramercy Park North, had her doorman meticulously docu-

ment the movements (or, as it turned out, the virtual abandonment) of police vehicles in front of their building.

Working with the 13th Precinct's Detective Hughes, residents say both problems have been virtually solved.

The Community Affairs Officer sent out a memo asking cops to park their cars elsewhere, or face disciplinary action. As a visual aid to help officers remember where not to leave their cars, Hughes placed police saw horses in front of 39 Gramercy Park North for six months.

"That way, the police learned not to park there," said one resident.

"It's not a perfect solution, but it's a good start," added Arlene Harrison, head of the Gramercy Block Association.

By all accounts, such parking problems aren't uncommon near any precinct. The 13th comes with a unique set of headaches, however, since it also houses the police academy, instructional lab, Manhattan South borough office and detective and homicide squads.

Which means more cars. The precinct also now must make do with fewer parking options, since a lot under the FDR Drive is no longer available, and parking on Third Avenue has been outlawed.



Chris Lynn

So cops take what they can get. Many pull up their personal vehicles in any available space adjacent to the station house, which is technically illegal.

Anger said that he not only turns a blind eye toward cops parking their own cars on the street, but also toward residents doing the same thing.

"I know they're aren't many spaces to go around," he said. "We're not trying to throw anybody off the block. We don't kill these people with summonses if they pull up to unload or even park for several hours. We try to accommodate everybody."

As for Lynn's DOT team, which proudly declared the problem solved ("And all it took was one meeting," enthused one spokesman): Come back down to earth. Every problem can't be remedied with a quick fix like the Madison Square traffic problem.

And there's nothing wrong with admitting the obvious.