

Vice Grip targets hookers

By Pedro Ruz Gutierrez

1/29
2000

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

Bolstered by public complaints, increases in arrests and other cities' experiences, Orlando and Orange County authorities unveiled a plan Friday to crack down on prostitution.

About 60 residents and business owners attended the announcement of Operation Vice Grip in the back lot of a restaurant, only a few blocks from where a woman in tight black clothes waited for customers.

The plan makes areas around certain major roads — such as Colonial Drive and South Orange Blossom Trail — off limits to prostitutes and repeat offenders. If caught there again, they will be charged with violating their probations, which could lead to additional jail time.

For Dedra Jenkins, 37, who has lived in the shadows of adult businesses, prostitution and crime since 1975, the plan is long overdue. "It's time to take another step," said the mother of five, who claimed to have been propositioned many times by men driving near her home on 22nd Street.

Jenkins, president of the Holden Heights neighborhood association, clapped and cheered as Orange County Sheriff Kevin Beary, Orlando Police Chief Jerry Demings and Orange-Osceola State Attorney Lawson Lamar described their plans.

Steve Sullivan, co-owner of Cowboys Restaurant, 1108 S. Orange Blossom Trail, where the plan was announced, said he was elated. Prostitution "is no longer a sin against society, it's a health issue," he said, alluding to a report that 51 prostitutes arrested recently had tested positive for HIV.

"Prostitutes will be told not to go back," Beary said. "Folks, it's very simple. Just like a pedophile when they've been told to stay away from children."

Demings said police arrests for prostitution in the city increased steadily in the past three years, peaking at 400 in 1999.

Lamar said he is confident the proposal will withstand constitutional challenges. The plan is modeled after one credited with reducing prostitution in St. Petersburg, Beary said.

"Some of our critics would say that this is a victimless crime," Lamar said. "The citizens of these streets are victims as well as their children on their way to school. . . . and the prostitutes are enslaved by drug abuse and pimps."

The area, which on a map resembles an upside-down L, runs two blocks wide from Holden Avenue north to West Colonial Drive and east to Mills Avenue.