



Crackdown on sex trade on Route 46 in South Hackensack

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The Horizon Inn in South Hackensack, where a teen girl was rescued last year from an alleged human trafficking ring.

New scrutiny of a stretch of hotels on Route 46 in South Hackensack with a decades-long reputation as an epicenter for prostitution has produced a soaring number of arrests in the past year, a fact that emerged in the aftermath of last week's announcement that local authorities dismantled a human trafficking ring that operated there.

Police Chief Joseph Terraccino said in an interview last week that his 17-member department increased arrests last year by almost 2½ times as it focused attention on five hotels along the highway and uncovered, among other things, two cases of human trafficking involving underage girls working as prostitutes. The hotels, he said, are the site of a large majority of the arrests in his otherwise quiet township of 2,420 residents.

The hotels also have a lot of ordinary business that includes laborers and tourists looking for affordable rooms, and none of their employees or managers have been accused of wrongdoing.

On a recent night, the Horizon Inn was host to telephone workers from upstate New York who drank beer and grilled hamburgers on a terrace. The Congress Inn across the street drew a couple from Pennsylvania who said they had found the hotel on the Internet. A young man emerging from a room at the Stagecoach Motel with a woman he identified as his girlfriend said they were taking advantage of the hourly rates. The other hotels are the Knights Inn and the Airport Motel, which sits across from Teterboro Airport.

The hotels, car dealerships and other industrial businesses along Route 46 were the target of a redevelopment effort that stalled about 20 years ago. Now confronted with a growing number of arrests in the area, township officials say they have been talking to some local business owners about the prospects of a developer purchasing land along the highway and building a mix of retail stores, residential buildings and office space.

The township attorney, David Nasta, who has been charged to lead the effort, said that South Hackensack decided to look into development efforts last year at least in part because "people are fed up" with crime in the area. He said he hoped to announce a plan within about a month. The proposal "possibly" would affect local hotels, he said, adding that he could not discuss details because the plan

is not completed and has not been submitted to the township.

"My hope is that a deal can be put together shortly," he said. "I can tell you there are things that are close."

More patrols, police

The five hotels accounted for as much as 75 percent of last year's 620 arrests, up from 255 arrests in 2013, Terraccino said.

"It certainly does seem like a high number for a town of that size," said Elliott Currie, professor of criminology, law and society at University of California, Irvine. "I suspect what's going on in terms of the rise in arrests is not that there's more going on, but the police and city officials have decided, 'OK, it's time for a crackdown on this.'"

Local police departments aren't required by law to report all arrests to county, state or federal authorities, making it difficult to compare the number of arrests in South Hackensack with other towns in North Jersey.

Among the reasons for the sharp increase in arrests, Terraccino said, are additional patrols at the hotels and the hiring of nine young officers who have been aggressive in making stops, along with undercover operations that target Internet advertising of prostitution.

The chief said police made 222 narcotics arrests last year, up from 53 in 2013, and 50 prostitution arrests, up from 14. Terraccino said that prostitution arrests often lead to drug arrests because the two crimes go "hand in hand."

Last May, the 17-member Police Department arrested 14 people in a sting operation targeting prostitution and drug dealing at a hotel whose name they have not made public. "They almost outnumbered us," Capt. Robert Kaiser of the township police said of the defendants.

Months later, on Oct. 1, police arrested two women at the Horizon Inn while rescuing a 16-year-old girl from an alleged human trafficking and prostitution ring after an undercover police officer answered an advertisement on Backpage.com, an advertisement website that authorities say has become popular in the prostitution trade.

Acting Attorney General John J. Hoffman announced last week that the arrests had led to the indictment of five people on first-degree human trafficking charges and other offenses. He said that the girl, a runaway from Brooklyn, had been trapped in a "wretched life of prostitution" and "modern-day slavery."

Police said they rescued another human trafficking victim, a 17-year-old girl, at the Stagecoach in January 2014. A Bloomfield man, Michael R. Tucker, was charged with human trafficking and released from jail after posting \$200,000 bail. A spokeswoman for the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office said the case was "pending a grand jury review." The accused could not be reached for comment last week.

Location a factor

Kaiser said authorities do not blame the hotels because "they have a business to run, and it's difficult to know who you're renting a room to, to say they're up to no good." But he added that the hotels, because of their location on a highway between Paterson and New York City, draw some people who deal in drugs and prostitution.

"As long as those hotels are there, there will be that kind of element," Kaiser said.

Harish Suarti, part owner of the Horizon and Congress hotels, said his employees examine customers' photo identifications and inform police when they see something suspicious. But he added that they "cannot infringe on anyone's rights" and that "sometimes, what people do, we can't control."

His two hotels are kept in good repair, he said, adding that criminals "migrate to places in disrepair." He said it was "premature" to say how he and his associates would respond to an offer to purchase the properties for a potential development, adding that he would welcome talking to the Township Committee and Police Department about their concerns and would follow "any suggestions they have."

A manager at the Airport Motel, Kenny Gandhi, said police "sometimes" made arrests at his hotel, but he added, "I don't know the reasons." The hotel, he said, recently installed security cameras that are monitored in the office. For security reasons, he said, the hotel also replaced wooden doors with metal ones. When asked whether prostitution was a problem at the hotel, he said: "We don't have anything like that here. About the drugs, I'm not sure."

The family that owns the Stagecoach and the Knights Inn referred questions to a supervising partner, who did not respond to messages last week.

The Knights Inn is a franchise hotel chain under the larger Wyndham Hotel Group, which is owned by Wyndham Worldwide.

"We would not track specific crimes that happen at specific hotels," said Rob Myers, a spokesman for the Wyndham Hotel Group. "I'd imagine if there was [a lot of crime] we would be in touch with owners more frequently about specific issues."

Rates a draw

People staying at the hotels said they were drawn by relatively low room rates. Dustin Johnson, a 33-year-old clothing designer from Los Angeles, said he had found the Horizon on TripAdvisor and had reserved a room for a business trip because it was “cheap” for the area at \$75 a night. It also was convenient, he said, because he was able to catch a nearby bus to New York City, where he has been working.

“I looked at Hilton in the city and it was \$300 a night,” he said.

The telephone workers from upstate New York said the Horizon was clean “for what you pay.” They said they had seen police entering a room on one occasion last year but had not noticed illegal activity. “The thing we see mostly is people cheating on their spouses, that’s what it looks like to me,” one of the men said.

Inside the office at the Stagecoach Motel — where an overnight stay costs \$55 and one hour goes for \$20 — a sign warns that rooms are “rented for lawful purposes only. Unlawful activity will not be permitted in the room.”

Sandy Fernandes of Lodi and her boyfriend, Kassim Mouzone of Passaic, said they stay overnight at the Stagecoach twice a week as an affordable “getaway.” But they said there was a tradeoff: Once they found a crack pipe on a bathroom windowsill. They also said police make “a lot of arrests” at the Stagecoach and stopped them many times in the parking lot.

“We get pulled over for no reason,” Mouzone said. “They have no business just doing that to people.”

Police responses

Last week, authorities provided a list of police responses to four of the township’s hotels, all directly on Route 46. They did not provide a list for the Airport Motel, which overlooks the highway but has an address on Huyler Street. The responses were for a variety of complaints, including “suspicious persons,” theft, disputes, lost or stolen property, unspecified arrests, fights and sexual assaults.

Last year, police went to the hotels 258 times, up from 145 in 2013. The numbers are down this year, 38 through April 13, compared with 61 for the same period last year.

It was unclear whether the lower numbers indicate a drop in crime. Kaiser said there appeared to be fewer advertisements for prostitution in the area on backpage.com after more than a year of undercover operations targeting that website.

But Kaiser was clearly pleased with the number of arrests the department has made.

“I think that’s a high number considering the size of our Police Department,” he said.

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Arrests in South Hackensack

The number of arrests by the 17-member Police Department increased by almost 2½ times from 2013 to 2014:

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Narcotics	11	20	9	53	222
Prostitution	0	13	0	14	50
DWI	1	7	5	5	19
Warrants	47	32	22	128	249
Other	38	81	48	55	80
Total	97	153	84	255	620

Source: South Hackensack Police Department