

NATION

Seattle neighborhood's 'Autonomous Zone' a new tactic to stem violence

Police cede area in city to de-escalate violence.

By **Mike Baker** New York Times | JUNE 11, 2020 — 11:48PM

SEATTLE — On the streets next to a police precinct in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, protesters and officers spent a week locked in a nightly cycle of standoffs, at times ending with clouds of tear gas.

But facing a growing backlash over its dispersal tactics in the aftermath of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, the Seattle Police Department this week offered a concession: Officers would abandon their precinct, board up the windows and let the protesters have free rein outside.

In a neighborhood that is the heart of the city's art and culture — threatened these days as rising tech wealth brings in gentrification — protesters seized the moment. They reversed the barricades to shield the liberated streets and laid claim to several city blocks, now known as the “Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone.”

“This space is now property of the Seattle people,” read a banner on the front entrance of the now-empty police station. The entire area was now a homeland for racial justice — and, depending on the protester one talked to, perhaps something more.

What has emerged is an experiment in life without the police — part street festival, part commune. Hundreds have gathered to hear speeches, poetry and music. On Tuesday night, dozens of people sat in the middle of an intersection to watch “13th,” the Ava DuVernay film about the criminal justice system's impact on African-Americans. On Wednesday, children made chalk drawings in the middle of the street.

One block had a designated smoking area. Another had a medic station. At the “No Cop Co-op,” people could pick up a free LaCroix sparkling water or a snack. No currency was accepted, but across the street, in a nod to capitalism, a bustling stand was selling \$6 hot dogs. It was dealing in U.S. dollars.

On Wednesday night, President Donald Trump tried to portray the scenes in the city as something more sinister. He called for government leaders to crack down on the protesters, declaring on Twitter that “Domestic Terrorists have taken over Seattle.”

“Take back your city NOW,” Trump wrote in a tweet directed at Mayor Jenny Durkan and Gov. Jay Inslee. “If you don't do it, I will. This is not a game.”

Durkan responded with a tweet of her own: “Make us all safe. Go back to your bunker.”

The protest zone has increasingly functioned with the tacit blessing of the city. Harold Scoggins, the fire chief, was there Wednesday, chatting with protesters, helping set up a call with the police department and making sure the area had portable toilets and sanitation services.

“I have no idea where we're headed,” Scoggins said in an interview. “We've been working step by step on how to build a relationship, build trust in small things, so we can figure this out together.”



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People gathered in the Seattle neighborhood of Capitol Hill, now an “autonomous zone,” where residents look after themselves.

The demonstrators have also been trying to figure it out, with various factions voicing different priorities.

While Floyd's death drove most of the energy in the streets toward ending police violence and racial injustice, some of those here in recent days have pushed for a wider focus.

"The more we encourage and focus on the race thing, the greater our attention is not focusing on the fact that this is class warfare," said a 28-year-old protester and self-described anarchist who identified himself only by his first name, Fredrix.

On Tuesday night, Kshama Sawant, a City Council member, led protesters down to City Hall, holding a gathering inside the building in which she promoted her plan to tax Amazon, which is headquartered in the city.

But some of those who mobilized here over race and policing have begun to worry that these broader priorities could cloud the agenda at a time when vital progress for blacks seemed within reach.

"We should focus on just this one thing first," said Moe'Neyah Dene Holland, a Black Lives Matter activist. "The other things can follow suit. Because honestly, black men are dying and this is the thing we should be focusing on."
