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Darkened streetlights fail to raise crime rate

Vandalism, burglary and robbery in Des Moines have dropped 3.5 percent.

By **TOM ALEX** and **TIM PALUCH**

REGISTER STAFF WRITERS

June 5, 2004

A money-saving decision to turn off thousands of Des Moines streetlights met with dire predictions from critics who warned that darkened streets would create a haven for crime.

Statistics tell a different story.

The first four months of 2004 saw a 3.5 percent drop in vandalism, burglary and robbery, and "we've observed no significant increase in crime in the areas where the lights have been turned off," Police Maj. Dale Patch said.

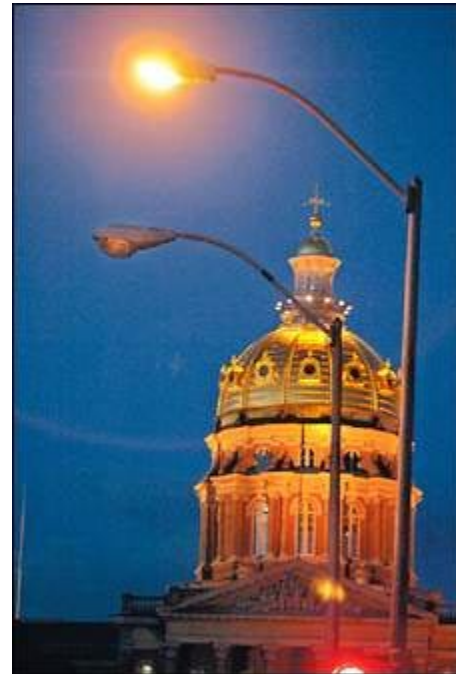
Cash-strapped city leaders last summer came up with a plan that would cut power to 39 percent of streetlights along major streets and save taxpayers an estimated \$700,000 a year.

Seventeen percent of the city's 23,376 streetlights went dark in September.

Concerned residents howled.

"Thieves don't like light," business owner Mike Kinter said last year. He said the move would set back crime prevention measures taken over the past 10 years.

Earlier this week, Kinter acknowledged that the darkness has had no noticeable



HOLLY McQUEEN/THE REGISTER

On/Off: One streetlight along Locust Street helps light the way; another is turned off.

Streetlights

NUMBERS: Gary Fox, the city's traffic and transportation director, said 4,225 streetlights were doused in September.

REQUESTS: For various reasons, primarily security concerns, 170 lights have been turned on again.

ON/OFF: Officials say 12,661 70-watt residential streetlights are in operation. Turned off were roughly 39 percent of the higher-wattage lights along main streets and heavily traveled areas.

STATS: Overall crime in Des Moines dropped by 6 percent in 2003 after a 10 percent increase in 2002. The first four months of 2004 saw a 3.5 percent drop in street crime.

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effect, and said, "I understand both sides."

Others remain unconvinced that the move was a good idea, no matter how much money it saves.

Dave Reed says it's about convenience, not crime.

"The city in general is still well-lit enough that crime isn't a problem," said Reed, whose home near Drake University is across the street from one of the lights that was turned out. "You want to see where you are going when you have to go outside."

When the issue first surfaced, Reed said he found the idea of turning out streetlights ridiculous. His opinion hasn't changed.

"We expect the city to provide services for its taxpayers, services like police and fire and streetlights," Reed, 45, said Wednesday night while he walked along University Avenue with his 7-year-old son Spencer and the family dog. "It's still dark, and I'm still not happy about it."

Evy Washington of Des Moines puts little faith in crime statistics. She takes courses at Des Moines Area Community College's downtown campus and AIB College of Business just south of the loop and takes the bus home at night.

She's convinced that darkness will invite trouble.

"A lot of things happen in the dark," Washington, 40, said. "Things that maybe aren't reported as crimes."

Washington also wonders if taxpayers will ever see a benefit.

City officials "claim they want to save money, but I don't know if that's worth it," she said.

The city's traffic and transportation director, Gary Fox, said power has been returned to 170 of the darkened lights since September at the request of police officers, homeowners and business owners. All such requests must get city approval. A dozen came from police, most in the first three months.

One request came from elderly residents of the Hartford Manor apartment building at Southeast Sixth Street and Hartford Avenue.

The streetlight in front of the long, single-story building has been dark since last fall.

"We have one in a wheelchair, two with walkers, and it's just too dark out there," resident Neta Phillips said.

The tenants started a petition in April. Everyone signed. The city agreed to turn the light on.

So far, darkness remains.

"I'm glad to know they are going to turn it back on," Phillips said. "But we are still waiting."

Fox said some residents and business owners in areas where lights were turned out have complained about vandalism, burglary and other crime. Police and Fox point out that the statistics show no measurable increase since the lights went out.

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