

Influx of Transvestite Prostitutes Plaguing Manhattan Plaza Area

Five prostitutes stand at the corner of 42d Street and Ninth Avenue at 12:50 A.M. The air is hot and humid. When the M-11 bus stops, two more join them. All are strapping, powerfully built. Soon the largest, about 6 feet 6 inches tall in spike heels, strolls through two traffic lanes. As cars swing aside, the prostitute flags them with his skirt.

"They're like locusts," said Rodney Kirk, managing director of Manhattan Plaza, the West Side apartment complex. "They light around a car even if it's moving — four, five or six at a time." The problem has intensified with the hot weather. It is a volatile situation, for many of these night-prowling prostitutes are transvestites — unsettling in an area that is itself something of a new frontier.

Manhattan Plaza — twin, 45-story towers bordered by Ninth and 10th Avenues between 42d and 43d Streets — stands as an outpost of middle-class, subsidized housing in the Times Square area. Its 3,000 residents are a blend of performing artists and the elderly. They provide a stable residential base for a marginal neighborhood now in transition. "We're in our infancy," Mr. Kirk said, "in a fragile state. We need extra police protection."

Many evenings, transvestite prostitutes line 42d Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. The police say this area is no worse than several others in the city. Rather, it is the arrival of new residents and activities from Manhattan Plaza that has contributed to the transvestite prostitutes' rising notoriety and visibility.

Many Only Partially Dressed

The new residents are alarmed by the transvestite prostitutes, who often use the Manhattan Plaza garage for assignments and have been "a continuing problem," according to the management. The residents say they are more violent than female prostitutes. They are upset also by the transvestite prostitutes' appearance, for many are only partially clad.

The development's residents held a meeting recently with Borough President

Andrew J. Stein of Manhattan, Chelsea-Clinton community leaders and police and city officials.

Confronted with what seemed an endemic problem, Mr. Stein said at one point: "You know what they did in China during the 50's to solve the addict problem? They just shot everyone who was an addict. Now, is there any way we could do something like that?"

He told the residents he would "try to get you extra manpower" by having a uniformed policeman assigned to the area in the evenings.

Inspector Emil A. Ciccotelli, citywide commander of the public morals division, said the police have committed all the manpower they can. "We can't have discriminatory enforcement," he said. "We can't concentrate on one area. And we can't just send out sweep teams. We have to develop a personal case against each prostitute."

Richard D. Emery, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, said this was as it should be. "The streets belong to the people," he said, "and 'the people' includes transvestites. Cops can't just move people if they don't like the way they look."

The transvestite-prostitution problem is not a recent development. Dyer Avenue, an exit for Lincoln Tunnel traffic, cuts into the middle of the block, and the area is recognized as a stamping ground for streetwalkers. "This has been a chronic transvestite strip," said Carl B. Weisbrod, director of the Midtown Enforcement Project.

In a combined effort, the 42d Street Redevelopment Corporation, with the police and the Midtown Enforcement Project, closed a restaurant at 579 Ninth Avenue patronized by the transvestite prostitutes.

"That intersection where they congregate is not related to any specific establishment," Mr. Weisbrod said. "But then, they're mostly turning car tricks."