Richmond Police Department officers Danielle Evans, left, and Matt Stonebraker, right, chat with an individual while on patrol Thursday in Raven Park. The department recently launched a bike-and-foot patrol in the Iron Triangle neighborhood.

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Richmond
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a commitment to the businesses and citizens along the Macdonald Avenue corridor," said Lt. Mark Gigan, who supervises the city's weekday patrol.

Stonebraker spent hundreds of millions in recent years on a series of massive redevelopment projects along Macdonald, formerly the city's main drag and, more recently, a symbol of its economic stagnation.

Pedestrians fill the streets every day. Crime follows them: loitering and drug use in parks and parking lots, muggings near the transit stations, prostitution on the well-worn stroll around town.

"A lot of the guys who have been around here even know what our cars sound like," Stonebraker said.

Richmond police last devoted resources to a bicycle program in the early 2000s. It fell by the wayside during lean budget years, as did many other short-lived community policing programs, in part because most officers prefer to invest their effort in more traditional crime-fighting.

Stonebraker and Evans endure occasional teasing.

"How was bike patrol yesterday?" laughed a fellow officer in a passing police cruiser on a drizzly October afternoon.

But after three weeks, Stonebraker knows the job amounts to more than public relations. He and Evans made five arrests last week, including for weapons and drugs, and none would not have happened had they rolled through the neighborhood in a patrol car.

Neither officer responds to emergency calls. They move through their beat block by block, taking hours to cross turf covered in minutiae by car. They trade efficiency for the ability to study and process what they see and hear. Last week, Stonebraker stopped someone on Macdonald Avenue. While attending to the stop, he noticed a usually friendly neighborhood regular stand, across the street in Nevin Park, turn around and walk away.

"Usually I would let that go. I'm busy and, by the time I'm finished with the stop, he could be anywhere," Stonebraker said.

The man, surprised when Stonebraker appeared by his side, promptly admitted to carrying marijuana and went to jail.

The officers are the same faces, hear the same voices every day. They go to the same places every day, handle the same problems as they encounter them. Those who spend every day on the streets of the Iron Triangle learn the ways of their local officers in similar detail.

"When we were young, we gave you all the run," said Travis Williams, stepping to jaw a moment in front of King Elementary. "But youngers these days, it's ridiculous. What is up with these guns? Man, these kids got guns that go through your whole house. They got stuff you ain't got!"

Stonebraker and Evans chat, keeping an eye on the cars coming and going as school lets out. The principal recently asked for more police patrol to stop double parking out front.

It's the kind of request the Richmond Police Department can now more easily accommodate, even in a high-crime neighborhood.

"I've been carless out before, and I've been praised. You got all kinds," Stonebraker said. "But I love it. I'm seeing and hearing a lot more than I would in a car."


Patrol officers roll around Richmond

Police on bicycle duty in city's Iron Triangle say they gain new perspective on neighborhood

By Karl Fischer
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A little law enforcement can't deter love.

"You keeping out of trouble?" Officer Matt Stonebraker asked one heavily-tattooed Anthony on Richmond's Charlot Avenue.

"For now," he breathed back, gazing into Officer Danielle Evans' eyes.

Note to street-corner Romeo: When the female cop laughs, she's not laughing with you.

But Evans, Stonebraker and much of the Iron Triangle will enjoy plenty more opportunities for sociable conversation in coming weeks, as the Richmond Police Department introduces a two-officer bicycle unit intended as a face-to-face resource for residents in a neighborhood with well-documented street crime troubles.

In an era when the department increasingly touts its remote technology, with video cameras and microphones wired to surveil marauding flatland crooks, it's a tactic and old-fashioned policing, where all that separates cop from customer is a few feet of open air.

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"In light of our current staffing, it is a big commitment," Stonebraker said. But it's a little law enforcement can't deter love.