

YRP seminar offers tips to King residents to protect their homes and vehicles amid rising 'crimes of opportunity'

By Jim Stewart

Community safety was front and centre during a police-led seminar for King residents last week. Mayor Steve Pellegrini welcomed One District Command Superintendent Russ Bellman and his four-person York Regional Police presentation team into King Township Chambers. The theme of the evening 'Community Safety is a Shared Responsibility' was reinforced in an engaging manner by a quintet of YRP officers and civilian staff. In addition to Superintendent Bellman, who presented the framework of discussion and intervened intermittently, Detective Sergeant Sherwin Bachoo, Sergeant Matt Reid, Constable Riczard Wojtulewicz, and Head of Analytics Scott Hurst discussed regional and local crime rates, offered practical tips for 'hardening' homes and cars to resist theft, and engaged a group of over 50 residents in multiple, lively Q and A sessions interspersed throughout the 2-hour seminar. Many of the residents in attendance offered poignant anecdotes about recent victims of auto theft or home burglary, having been violated by these 'crimes of opportunity.' The presentation deepened one's sense of community, according to King residents Harpreet Atwal and Himanshu Thapar who have lived in King City for 11 years. Thapar found the seminar 'very useful for me personally. It was encouraging to see that other people are having the same problems with theft and were able to discuss it in public. This was our first information session that we've attended in King and it's nice to see the structures and mechanisms in place by the YRP.' Atwal echoed Thapar's assessments of the presentation. He noted that 'It's comforting to see things being done. The apps that were presented were definitely empowering.' Both found the YRP presentation very useful and were 'motivated to join a Neighborhood Watch group' to combat local crime. This communal method of preventing crime in your own subdivision was a new concept to both Atwal and Thapar who admitted 'as did most who attended the seminar' that 'Neighborhood Watch was something we hadn't thought about.' The presentation clearly struck a chord with the residents in attendance. The opening statistical segment caught the attention of the audience. Scott Hurst, YRP Supervisor of BI and Analytics, discussed the informative nature of The Community Portal, an online database available in dozens of languages, and delineated crime trends in King neighborhoods. The civilian member of the YRP assured residents at the outset that 'York Region is one of the safest municipalities in Canada, based on communities of a similar size.' The head of analytics pointed out how the public can access all of the YRP press releases regarding ongoing investigations and presented the rich database's main features including The Community Safety Map that depicted the kinds of crimes that have been committed and where they were committed across York Region in the last 30 days. The personable and engaging Hurst then focused on the incidence of crime more locally and noted that '10 crimes have been committed in King in the last 7 days' including assaults, vehicle thefts, and arson. He also showed how residents can go directly to the Crimestoppers Canada link to offer tips to the YRP and encouraged the audience to watch an engaging video entitled Car thieves are thinking differently that offered crime prevention tips. Hurst noted that there have been '21 Break and Enters in the last 6 months in King and that Tuesday has the highest incidence of B & E.' The analytics expert for the YRP offered comparative rates of crime in the 9 municipalities that comprise York Region and cautioned residents 'that the middle of the night is when the highest incidence of motor vehicle theft occurs.' Hurst and his four YRP colleagues reminded residents that parking vehicles in the garage (if possible) 'remains the simplest way to avoid these crimes of opportunity.' Another feature of the one-year old Community Portal that captured the attention of residents was The Road Safety dashboards that featured the Worst Intersections in York Region for auto collisions 'Yonge Street and Green Lane won that dubious distinction' and Hurst transitioned to a more local focus regarding dangerous intersections by pointing out that 'King Sideroad and Bathurst led the way last year with the most collisions in King with 35.' In reinforcing the theme of the evening ('Community Safety is a Shared Responsibility?'), Hurst pointed out a crime-fighting tool entitled the Security Camera Registry where residents were encouraged to 'register their home security camera with the YRP so that detectives could use footage by permission for ongoing investigations.' All five YRP officials noted that the security cameras might not prevent crime, but they will aid significantly in investigations, apprehensions, and convictions of criminals. A final segment explored by Hurst listed the Top 10 Vehicle Makes Stolen in 2022 in King including Dodge (mostly pickup trucks) 48; Land Rover 28, Ford 25, Jeep 9, Chevrolet 5, Acura 4, Audi 4, Honda 4, and Lexus 4. Detective Sergeant Sherwin Bachoo of the YRP Criminal Investigations Bureau, segued into the discussion of car theft and noted that 'Auto thefts are increasing in the GTA and provincially, especially push button ignition cars.' Det. Sgt. Bachoo shocked the audience when he stated that the 'YRP have

recovered cars from as far away as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Africa and the typical car thief prowling in York Region is from Montreal. He added that every two weeks, the YRP is arresting at least one person for stealing a car and delivering it to Montreal, one of the two car ports in Canada. He implored residents to lock their vehicles and take their important personal belongings out of their cars parked on driveways because thieves are getting into unlocked cars and committing fraud with credit cards within hours. Bachoo also pointed out that cars parked in garages were generally far safer. Cars on driveways are crimes of opportunity. Cars in garages are too complicated and thieves fear they might get locked into a garage after entry. Det. Sgt. Bachoo amplified Hurst's prior remarks about residential break and enters and offered some chilling insights into criminality in York Region. The engaging expert pointed out to gathered residents that B & Es occur mostly during daytimes when homes are vacant. Front doors or rear doors are forced or glass is smashed out. Gone are the days when thieves are stealing big items like televisions. The average time the thief spends in the house is 2-3 minutes so he or she takes whatever fits into a pillow case: jewelry, cash, designer clothing, or accessories. Bachoo recommended that residents invest in security cameras and cautioned that the cameras might not prevent the crime but they will help with the investigation. He also recommended purchasing alarms, especially ones connected to your cell phone. Constable Riczard Wojutlewicz added to Det. Sgt. Bachoo's recommendations in the closing segment by extolling the virtues of the Neighbourhood Watch Program which generated much audience discussion. The YRP Crime Prevention Officer noted that the Neighbourhood Watch Program promotes a sense of community, it is citizen-run, provides a sense of security, and involves a coordinated effort between police and community. The South African-born Officer stressed the importance of community and its partnerships and implored the audience to create Neighbourhood Watch groups to help prevent crimes and break down the opportunities, the desire, and the ability of criminals and to reduce these crimes of opportunity. Constable Wojo (as he was affectionately referred to on-stage by his fellow presenters) offered residents some timely and practical tips referred to as target hardening to points of entry in the home. He recommended installing high resolution surveillance cameras and joining the Security Camera Registry Program. Wojutlewicz invited residents to be part of the solution to home and car thefts: We need you as a community to help. He placed some of the onus on individual homeowners to install window laminate protection and strategically-placed motion sensor lighting to dissuade criminals and their opportunities to commit theft. Superintendent Russ Bellman reinforced and summarized his YRP colleagues' remarks succinctly. Bottom line, there isn't one solution, but there are so many deterrents. He reminded residents that the YRP has chosen to present our internal data to the public via The Community Portal to increase public awareness of crime and issues of safety in York Region. Superintendent Bellman engaged in a final Q and A session where neighbors extolled the virtues of the RING security system and its myriad attributes. King Township Mayor Pellegrini thanked the presenters and, in closing, reminded residents to call the non-emergency number 1-866-876-5423, x7008 to report suspicious behaviour in neighborhoods and help curb crimes of opportunity afflicting all sectors of York Region.