

Firing range irks these neighbors

APD has practiced there since '50s; now Air Force does too.

By J.D. Capelouto

jdcapelouto@ajc.com

Weekend mornings trigger a familiar feeling for Robin Sillers. She used to enjoy sleeping in and relaxing. But now, Sillers is often awoken by startling, rapid gunfire – as early as 8 a.m. on Sundays.

“I thought I was gonna sleep in,” she recalled thinking one recent morning. “Guess I’m not gonna sleep.”

The quick “bang, bang, bang” she heard isn’t a cause for alarm, though. Sillers knows it’s coming from the Atlanta Police Department’s outdoor gun range, located yards behind her subdivision. The range lies barely outside Atlanta city limits in unincorporated DeKalb County – near

southeast Atlanta and Gresham Park – but APD has practiced there since the 1950s, department spokesman Carlos Campos said in a statement.

APD isn’t the only agency that uses the firing range. For more than a year, the department has also allowed the U.S. Air Force Reserve Command to use the range, Campos said.

Several residents said the gunfire used to only happen during business hours on weekdays, when most of the residents were away from their homes. But in the past several months, the frequency and volume of gunfire have increased, disrupting their sleep and sense of security, the residents said.

“It became like a war zone in the back,” said Patrick O’Haley, who also lives in the Gates at Bouldercrest subdivision. “It’s been kind of disrespectful.”

Range continued on A11

THE STORY SO FAR

- Atlanta police began using the shooting range in unincorporated DeKalb County in the 1950s.
- Residents began moving into the Bouldercrest area in the 1960s; nearby McNair High School was built in 1964.
- The Gates at Bouldercrest subdivision was built adjacent to the shooting range about 20 years ago.
- APD says it uses the shooting range on weekdays until 4 p.m., but let the U.S. Air Force Reserve Command begin using it on weekends until 7 p.m. more than a year ago.
- Neighbors, however, say they hear gunfire at sporadic times, like early in the morning, late at night and on weekends.
- APD says the Air Force Reserve should stop using the shooting range sometime this year when renovations are complete at their facility at Dobbins Air Reserve Base in Marietta.

FROM PAGE ONE

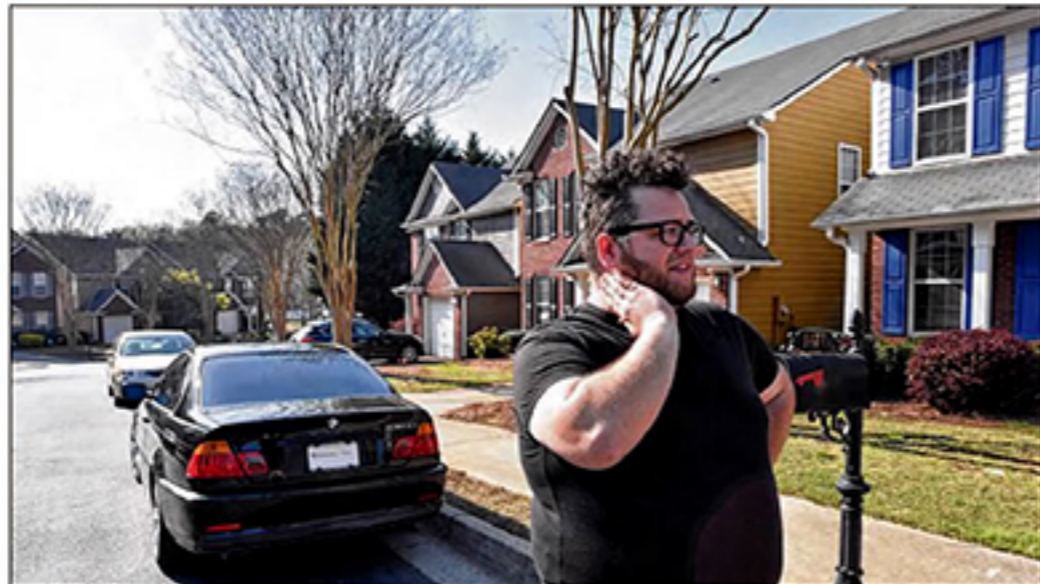
Range

continued from A1

Campos said the Police Department generally uses the range Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. to teach recruits and recertify officers, and conducts night exercises about four to six times a year. The Air Force, he said, has a "memo of understanding" with the city to use to range for one Saturday and Sunday each month from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

But the neighbors said the range is used at sporadic times, and they hear gunfire more than one weekend per month, and often at night. Sometimes it seems just one person is shooting, while other times there may be a larger squad, they said.

"We certainly want to be considerate of people who have moved near our range and are affected by its operations," Campos said, noting that the firing range long predates the nearby subdivision. "We also want to make sure they are informed of any changes to our operations



"It became like a war zone in the back," said Patrick O'Haley, who lives in the Gates at Bouldercrest subdivision near APD's firing range. "It's been kind of disrespectful."

HYOSUB SHIN /
HSHIN@AJC.COM

and recently let them know of the additional monthly training by the Air Force."

Campos said APD told the neighborhood's homeowner association president at the time when the Air Force started practicing at the space.

Last year, O'Haley complained to APD about hearing gunfire early on a Sunday. Several days later, he was told the military was using the range, according to an email.

"If they were sticking to their times, it wouldn't be

such an issue," O'Haley said. "And if they were being more transparent."

The subdivision has more than 100 homes right off Bouldercrest Road in a historically black community that has become more popular and developed in recent years.

"With the police, sometimes you can feel powerless," O'Haley said. "Maybe it's time for them to go."

Police officers are required to maintain their marksmanship skills every year to stay certified under Geor-

gia Peace Officer Standards and Training Council rules. They also do specialized training for certain weapons and units.

The Air Force Reserves bring their own ammo and targets, and pay overtime for the APD range staff who have to be there on weekends, Campos said. They are using the facility while their usual firing range at Dobbins Air Reserve Base in Marietta is under construction.

Nsenga Burton, another resident, said the shooting

has sometimes gone until midnight, and she has also felt loud booms that shake her home.

"My dog was scared to go out of the house. My daughter was scared to come down the steps," she said, recalling the first time she heard the bangs. Burton and several other neighbors said they didn't know about the range when they moved into the area. Others knew about it but said it was only used during business hours at the time.

DeKalb County code enforcement officials said they have received no formal complaints about the firing range.

O'Haley said his wife, who has an afternoon and evening shift at work, is constantly woken up by the shooting, and it's sometimes tough to get his infant daughter to sleep.

"If we hear a rapid succession of gunshots, it's like, 'Oh, somebody's using the police range again,'" he said. "We've become desensitized to hearing it. It's very concerning."

That leaves neighbors worried that the routine gunfire could cloud actual violence happening in the community. Residents sometimes resort to posting on the neighborhood social networking site Nextdoor if they hear gunshots, to check whether they are coming from the range or are a real danger on the streets, Burton said.

The entrance to the shooting range is around the corner from the homes on Key Road, but it is closed off to the public. Neighbors said they've never been able to see the range, though they hear it regularly.

"Just be good neighbors," Sillers said, echoing the concern that there appears to be no set schedule for the range. "Just let us know what's going on."

Campos, the department spokesman, said construction is almost done at the Air Force's range, so the military should stop using APD's facility sometime this year. "We certainly do not intend to be a nuisance to our neighbors," he said.