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Steps urged at UMass after 'Blarney Blowout' melee

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

UMass Amherst students on campus Thursday.

AMHERST — A report commissioned after a violent St. Patrick's Day melee near UMass Amherst blames a "collective failure" for the drunken gathering, and recommends the town ban the event, that the university crack down on visitors and booze inside dorms, and that police act less aggressively.

The recommendations are detailed in a 65-page report scheduled to be released Friday by Edward Davis, former Boston police commissioner, who was hired by UMass to lead a review after an unruly gathering led to dozens of arrests and clashes with police. It also renewed criticism about an inability by college and local authorities to prevent and quell such disturbances.

Known as the Blarney Blowout, this year's celebration was at least the third straight year the event had caused problems. The town said it would take steps to end the gathering.

The wide-ranging report apports blame all around, saying the

event “was a collective failure by the town, the university, and the students,” and it said police were unprepared, overwhelmed, and unnecessarily forceful.

“The only way to navigate your way out of this difficulty is to work together,” Davis said in a phone interview. “Everyone that we’ve talked to has been very focused on moving forward, making sure this doesn’t happen again — or if there is another incident, that it’s handled better.”



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Davis report on ‘Blarney Blowout’

The review by former police commissioner Ed Davis follows a wild March party and large law enforcement response.

In other key recommendations, the report calls on UMass to expand efforts to educate students about the dangers of alcohol; urges campus and town police to train and plan for events together; and advises the town to hire more officers.

Both Kumble Subbaswamy, UMass Amherst chancellor, and John Musante, town manager, said in separate interviews that the university and the town will implement many of the recommendations soon, if not immediately.

“I think everyone has the same goal in mind, which is to make sure that this is a very supportive and enjoyable college town that doesn’t periodically face these ugly incidents,” Subbaswamy said.

The report noted that riots and other large disturbances have occurred on other campuses across the country. UMass has had its fair share, sparked either by large annual off-campus parties or students reacting to numerous Boston sports championship runs during the past decade.

Such chaos has often gone viral via online video sites, frustrating administrators, students, and alumni who have taken concrete steps to temper UMass' image as a "party school."

During the past several years, however, arrests and disciplinary offenses by students have dropped, according to federal data. UMass surveys show that rates of high-risk drinking have plummeted over the past decade, while the university's profile, including the academic stature of students, has risen.

During the March riot, revelers swarmed apartment complexes near campus. Some party-goers damaged property, fought one another, and threw filled beer cans and bottles, snowballs, and rocks at police, who shot an estimated 600 pepper-spray and sting balls to scatter the crowd.

As people dispersed, some blocked traffic and bothered residents, the report said.

Of the 58 arrested, 21 were UMass Amherst students. They faced charges that included inciting a riot, disorderly conduct, failure to disperse, and alcohol violations.

Many of the troublemakers were not students, the report said, and the large influx flowing into Amherst on the eve of the party hinted it would be a massive gathering.

The night before the riot, some 7,000 people registered as guests in campus dormitories, which does not count the many who undoubtedly stayed at off-campus apartments. Campus parking lots, including some that are normally empty on weekends, were overflowing, as were dining halls, liquor stores, and bars. Young people were seen sleeping in dorm common areas, even in their cars.

Acting on the report's recommendation, Subbaswamy said the university immediately will move to cap the number of guests allowed in dorms and will train resident assistants and dorm security staff to alert authorities whenever they see illegal activity.

Davis called for Amherst officials to ban the Blarney Blowout.

Musante said that the town, with help from bar owners, is committed to ending it and any other events that pose similar concerns.



ROBERT RIZZUTO/THE REPUBLICAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Police detain a participant in the pre-St. Patrick's Day "Blarney Blowout" near the University of Massachusetts in Amherst this March.

The report said UMass and the town should offer more alcohol-free activities for students and that police make better use of social media to predict problem events, and use covert and public security cameras to monitor the gatherings.

It also urges the state Legislature allocate more funding to train and hire town and campus officers, and that the town, in particular, increase its police force of 46 officers — 15 fewer than the campus force.

The size of the university and town police forces can present a challenge to overseeing the town of 38,000 -- including more than 22,000 undergraduates at the state's flagship university. About half of the students live off campus.

"The town is committed to identifying and pursuing both local and state resources to improve our police capabilities," including trying to add personnel, Musante said Thursday.

Some students have accused town police, who handled most of the response to Blarney Blowout, of being too aggressive. And Davis, credited for leading successful Boston police responses to several large sports celebrations, questioned the tactics of Amherst police in trying to quell the riot. Davis provides security consulting services, including for The Boston Globe.

"The police response, including the donning of riot helmets and the use of chemical munitions had the effect of creating confusion and perpetuating the unruly behavior," the report said.

Town and campus police should fully embrace community policing and building better relationships not only with students, residents, and business owners, but with each other, including by training together and sharing coverage of their abutting jurisdictions, the report said.

Student government president Vinayak Rao praised the report for its thoroughness.

"This is a learning opportunity," Rao said. "This provides us an opportunity to come together to establish a line of communication between all stakeholders and to make a concerted effort to change the culture."

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