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Police angered by criticism over 'Blarney Blowout'

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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AMHERST — The chiefs of Amherst town police and campus police at the University of Massachusetts Amherst said Friday they disagree with a recommendation that they be less aggressive when handling large disturbances at the school and in the neighboring community.

The two law enforcement leaders said they do not believe officers were overly forceful or aggressive in their response when a large off-campus party spun out of control in March. Officers donned riot gear and shot an estimated 600 rounds of pepper spray and sting balls at revelers, some of whom threw rocks and beer bottles at them.

Tied to an annual St. Patrick's Day celebration known as the Blarney Blowout, the melee prompted UMass to hire former Boston Police commissioner Edward F. Davis to review what happened and develop recommendations for the school, the town, their police departments, students, and local business owners.

Davis, a highly regarded law enforcement expert who has been commended for successfully handling numerous large celebratory gatherings in Boston, issued [his report](#) Friday.

The report described the event in March as “a collective failure by the town, the university, and the students.”



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Amherst Police Chief Scott P. Livingstone said he believes authorities “did the right thing” in response to the disorder.

“The decision to use either chemical munitions and/or riot helmets came from a commander and in my opinion, at that time, was the right decision,” Livingstone said.

UMass Police Chief John Horvath agreed.

Many students were skeptical that law enforcement would change, particularly in light of the police chiefs' remarks Friday.

Some criticized police for their defensive response to the report.

“I think they should come out with a formal apology,” said Cole Jaskoviak, a 21-year-old senior.

Students said they do not expect a significant result from the measures UMass plans to take to try to curb student drinking and partying.

Some expressed doubt that the university would be able to enforce promises it made Friday to reduce the number of visitors students can have in the dorms, and to crack down on smuggling alcohol into residence halls.

“Students will find a way around it,” said Jaskoviak. “We’re very innovative.”

Freshman Jesse Sachs, 18, said he opposes plans to further limit dorm guests.

“It’s a knee-jerk reaction,” said Sachs, who has three non-UMass friends staying in his dorm this weekend. “Just because there was some rowdy party and it went too far, why should students who just want to have a few friends over for a night or weekend to chill be the ones who suffer?”

Davis and police have admitted Blarney Blowout will be tough to stop because the celebration over the years has changed from bar-organized events to more widespread partying.

However, town and campus officials said they have already successfully taken steps to stop similar events.

Livingstone said that some local bars had planned to host celebrations this weekend for Halfway to St. Patrick’s Day, formerly known as Halfway to Blarney Blowout.

“Halfway to anything — we’re putting an end to that,” he said.

Students lamented that the school’s reputation has been hurt by the actions of small numbers of students and by young people who do not attend the school.

“Other people who come here aren’t representing the university, but what they do still reflects on us,” said Dan Dobrosielski, 21, a senior.

Of the 58 arrested people arrested at this past Blarney Blowout, 21 were UMass students.

In recent years, arrests, disciplinary offenses, and rates of high-risk drinking by UMass students have dropped, according to campus surveys and federal data. Meanwhile, the university’s profile has risen.

Robert L. Caret, president of the UMass system, vowed that the university will do its part to prevent disturbances such as the one in March.

“UMass Amherst is on the rise — and dealing with the issues this report addresses will allow it to climb even higher in the future,” he said in a statement.

Town residents said they were encouraged by the university response, but stressed there is much to be done.

Helen Berg, who lives near campus, said she wants to see more efforts to cut down on student drinking and that town officials should act more decisively to prevent the promotion of events like Blarney Blowout.

“The students are indoctrinated by the culture but the town is definitely complicit,” she said.

Davis’s report also said UMass should do more to warn students about the dangers of alcohol, urged campus and town police to train together, and advised the town to hire more officers.

Livingstone said officers in his department were upset by the report.

“They’re going to need some time to vent and they’re pretty angry right now.”

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