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Southern Boulevard Merchants Say the Dimly Lit Street Scares Off Customers

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LONGWOOD — “Dark” does not do justice to the late-night landscape along dimly lit stretches of Southern Boulevard shadowed by an elevated train line, locals say.

“Everything is pitch black,” said David Rios, who owns a pet store near Southern Boulevard and Westchester Avenue. “It’s like walking through a tunnel.”

“It’s like you turned off all the lights in your room and closed the door,” said Jannah Manning, 10, who was recently shopping along the street with her mother.



Photo credit: DNAInfo/Patrick Wall

“I always come early,” before darkness falls, said Assiatou Diallo, 27, another shopper. “It gets very scary.”

The area’s dense darkness is not just creepy, merchants say — it’s also costly, demanding extra security and shorter business hours, discouraging after-work shoppers and emboldening thieves.

Last week, the [Southern Boulevard Merchant Association](#), which represents about 100 businesses along a one-mile stretch of the boulevard from Westchester Avenue to 174th Street, sent a petition with 400 signatures to the city’s Transportation Department urging it to improve the neighborhood’s street lighting.

“Crime is a major problem,” the petition reads, “and businesses, residents and shoppers feel unsafe walking around in the evening due to insufficient lighting.”

The petition already appears to have made an impact on the agency.

"DOT received this request from the merchants association and will be evaluating the lighting at this location," spokesman Nicholas Mosquera said Monday.

Jebel Ceesay, owner of the clothing store JB Collection and head of the merchants group, cited several sources of the limited lighting: the overhead 2-5 train tracks, too few streetlights and businesses that close early, shutting off their storefront illumination.

Because the area's early shadows can scare off customers and invite criminals, local businesses tend to close in the early evening or take added safety precautions, Ceesay said.

For instance, Ceesay installed security cameras in his store after a string of robberies, he said. In the evenings, he brings in an extra employee and uses a buzzer to let in customers.

"All that is hurting my pocket," Ceesay said.

A few weeks ago, robbers stormed into the boulevard's A-Z Deli, smashing security cameras and display cases and looting the cash register and ATM, at a cost of about \$6,000 to the store, said owner Zaid Illaheb.

Robbers have struck the deli four times in the past two years, and victimized at least five customers nearby, including a blind woman, Illaheb added.

"It's a good street," he said. "But at nighttime, people are scared."

A female employee at Nature's Garden, a beauty supply store, quit after refusing to work at the store after dark, said owner Khaddija Dukureh.

Dukureh herself feels unsafe working late, so shuts up shop early — a painful practice, since many regular customers race to the store after work only to find it locked, Dukureh admitted.

"My hours say 8:30, but I never stay that late because it's too dark and it's better to be safe," Dukureh said, lamenting, "Every single dollar we lose is not good."

The DOT conducted a Southern Boulevard lighting survey last year that included the area covered by the merchants group and concluded that its street lighting was sufficient, said Akila Shenoy, a program manager at the nonprofit [WHEDco](#), which provides technical assistance to the merchants association.

The group's petition asked the agency to reconsider its conclusion.

Ultimately, the merchants hope, the city will add extra lighting to the boulevard, drawing wary residents back onto the street.

"The more people walking in the street, the less crime you see," said Ceesay. "Even if we don't sell, we're safe."

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