

Costumed characters spin a web of concern

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Alleged theft is latest in a series of issues surrounding performers

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Although some of the costumed characters in Hollywood have been problematic, tourists generally enjoy their presence. (photo by Ian Lovett)

Officers detained at least two people dressed in Spider-Man costumes following the theft, but they were released after it was determined they were not involved, according to Lt. Marc Reina, with the Los Angeles Police Department's Hollywood Division. The suspect dressed as the web-slinger allegedly walked up to an employee of Starline Tours near the Chinese Theatre and snatched a bag containing the cash and receipts before fleeing. The suspect blended into the crowd before officers arrived, and remained at large as of Wednesday morning. Investigators are trying to determine the suspect's identity, which will be difficult because of the mask, Reina said.

"That's a tricky one," he added. "We are looking at what surveillance cameras are out there and will try to piece it together."

Reina said increased patrols have been ordered in the area in anticipation of the upcoming summer tourism season, and officers will be particularly watching the costumed characters. He added that the officers will be specifically looking for aggressive behavior, and the performers can be cited or arrested for crimes ranging from aggressive panhandling to battery.

The incident prompted concern among some longtime members of the Hollywood community. Kerry Morrison, executive director of the Hollywood Entertainment District and the Hollywood Business Improvement District, said the problems caused by the costumed performers appear to be escalating. During an incident in February, an individual dressed as SpongeBob SquarePants was detained, but not arrested, after being involved in an altercation on Hollywood Boulevard. Also in February, an individual dressed as Catwoman pepper-sprayed a Jack Sparrow costumed character after they were involved in an altercation. In 2009, a Spider-Man impersonator was arrested after striking a victim near Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue.

"This is an issue that concerns all of us in terms of how hospitable our sidewalks are," Morrison said. "Two weeks ago, we had a chamber of commerce retreat, and this was one of the top issues that came up. What

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happened with Spider-Man is one of the things we had been predicting.”

Morrison said the issue of fights between the costumed characters, and the performers aggressively soliciting tourists to pose with them for photographs and then asking them to pay, reached a boiling point in early 2010. As a result, the LAPD cracked down on the impersonators and removed many of them from the boulevard.

“The LAPD did a yeoman’s job in taking action,” Morrison said. “We call it, ‘The Summer of Peace of 2010’.”

The situation changed in December 2010, however, when a Los Angeles Superior Court judge issued a ruling that blocked officers from arresting the costumed characters unless they witnessed them committing a crime. The ruling came as the result of a lawsuit filed by four of the costumed characters who claimed their First Amendment rights were being violated. Since then, police have been monitoring the costumed characters and doing their best to keep the peace, but are limited in their power to arrest or remove the impersonators unless they witness the crime, according to Reina.

“If we don’t see it, that [victim] has to report the crime and then make a private person arrest,” he added. “A lot of times they call, and when they find out they may have to be subpoenaed back to court, they don’t want to do it. You have to have a victim who is willing to participate in the court process.”

Diego De La Garza, a deputy for Los Angeles City Councilman Eric Garcetti, 13th District, said the councilmember is also monitoring the situation and has worked to find a solution. So far, however, a long-term remedy has remained elusive. He said Garcetti would continue to work with the LAPD and representatives of the Hollywood Entertainment District before his term ends this summer.

“We haven’t given up,” he said. “We just haven’t found an answer that works and is constitutional.”

Morrison said her group is examining an ordinance in New York City that bans people from wearing masks in groups of three or more in public places. She said at least that would make it casier for authorities to identify suspects like the Spider-Man who stole the moncy last Friday. She added that representatives of the entertainment district and the chamber of commerec are waiting to see who wins the upcoming mayoral and city attorney clections, and they hope to aggressively work with the new officials to address the problem.

No solution can come quickly enough for local attorney and former Hollywood Chamber of Commerce president Jeff Briggs, who said a Captain America impersonator aggressively grabbed his arm during a recent walk down the boulevard. He said the problem has been growing, and will escalate if nothing is done.

“I reacted like I would anytime someone grabs me in public — I shoved him away,” Briggs said. “He came back at me and I said I was going to call the BID security. He took a few steps back and walked away, but thirty seconds later, he was grabbing someone else. That shouldn’t happen. If people behave themselves, it’s a good thing. The problem is, you have a few bad actors who will ruin the whole thing for everyone.”

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