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Councilwoman wants to put hit on 'Scarface' items

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FLINT - High on cocaine, movie gangster Tony "Scarface" Montana dramatically perishes in a gun battle not long after an ode to his favorite machine gun/grenade launcher.

"Say hello to my little friend!" he shouts amid the destruction of his drug empire.

But 2nd Ward City Councilwoman Jackie Poplar would like to say good-bye to "Scarface" movie T-shirts, posters and jackets that she says glamorize drugs and violence and have become popular with teens.

"Scarface" memorabilia depicting actor Al Pacino have turned up everywhere. There are Scarface bobbleheads, dart board cabinets and action figures.

That upsets Poplar, who is trying to work with community leaders on stopping the violence plaguing Flint residents, especially young people.

She said she'd like to ask merchants, "How can you sleep at night?"

"The only true part is you're going to die," Poplar said. "A lot of parents in the city need to realize the preacher and the teacher is not the role model, it's a movie, and if you haven't seen the jacket, they're all over town."

Poplar would like to see Flint schools ban the clothing and merchants sell the items only behind the counter with an age limit. She said parents and grandparents need to know the message "Scarface" presents.

"This is causing a lot of the shooting in our city," she said. "This is their role model. It's not Martin Luther King. It's not even Elvis Presley. It's Al Pacino. They weren't even born (when the movie came out). " It's absolutely crazy."

It won't be easy for Poplar to win her battle, said Carl Taylor, a Michigan State University professor who specializes in urban crime, gangs and their societal impact.

Taylor said the 1983 movie - which follows the rise of a Cuban immigrant from nothing to a drug lord - has been a classic in street culture for years. It has influenced video games and rap songs, and gained even more notoriety after several noted hip-hop stars talked up the movie in a documentary that accompanied the 2003 release of the film on DVD.

But Taylor said it would be a mistake to blame all of hip-hop for the popularity of what is an iconic film in an American society fascinated by gangsters. He said the tough-talking Montana is a hero to disenfranchised youth in communities beset with drugs and violence.

"Tony Montana is the epitome of machismo," he said.

Taylor said any bans or restrictions will only make the material more popular.

"We should be more concerned with the mindset than the paraphernalia," Taylor said. "If anything, you have reinforced the love affair the street has with this subject."

Larry Watkins, the Flint School District's director of pupil personnel services, said the district has the power to ban objectionable clothing, but he doesn't think "Scarface" items are that popular in the schools.

Watkins agrees the movie is violent and doesn't deliver "a good message." But he said the T-shirts are not as extreme as one that says "Don't be a snitch" - one of two T-shirts the district is in the process of banning.

"I don't want us to cross the line for freedom of expression," Watkins said.

Some Central High School students said the shirts are just a fashion trend, but others support a ban.

"They want to wear a superstar shirt," Jacqueline Marshall, a junior, said of her peers.

Sophomore Kevin Poole said his mom forbade him to wear such clothes.

"The shirts are violent. They promote drugs," he said.

Meanwhile, area merchants defended selling the memorabilia.

"It's wrong for young people to wear such things, (but) we still have to make a living," said Steve Issa, who sells the T-shirts at his Easy Pick grocery store on Lewis Street.

"If it's illegal, we don't sell them. It's a movie that affected them a lot. It's very popular."

Tammy Clark, assistant manager of Spencer Gifts in the Genesee Valley shopping center, said Poplar would probably be more concerned with other shirts and items in her store.

"The movie was violent, but it was a movie," said Clark, who said "Scarface" T-shirts and posters are popular with young people, but it's adults who tend to like the action figures and other items.

Debbie Washington, owner of CJ Fashions at the Dort Mall in Flint, said restrictions might be reasonable, but it's wrong to go after clothing merchants when there are equally violent television shows, video games and music.

"It's not all about the T-shirts," Washington said. "There is something that needs to be done in our community. We need more recreation, places where they can go. Why pull a T-shirt when you got live video on X-Box?"

Taylor agreed that changing economic and social conditions is the key to ending Scarface's popularity.

"Tony Montana and his kind have to become social pariahs," he said. "Right now, they are celebrities, and there lies the problem."