

ROWDY CONCERT FANS FACE THE MUSIC IN HARTFORD COURT

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THE HARTFORD COURANT

"What a concert . . . I tell ya!" a Hartford judge joked Thursday, as dozens of groggy Pearl Jam fans who spent a night in jail appeared before him.

The defendants, largely teenagers and college students, were accused of rushing the stage, kicking down barricades and fences, struggling with police, stealing cups from concession stands or peddling nitrous oxide balloons at the Meadows Music Theatre Wednesday night.

Hartford police made nearly 30 arrests and ejected 78 people from the amphitheater, which Meadows officials reported had a sellout crowd of 24,185 people. Three officers suffered injuries, including one who was bitten by a concertgoer.

The melee is being blamed on the hordes of people without tickets who scaled a chain-link fence around the theater's perimeter to get in. Police and Meadows security guards were sent to try to hold them back, leaving other areas inside the amphitheater uncovered, police said.

A rush of people on the lawn pushed through a barricade to get to the shed seating area for a better view because video screens on the lawn were turned off.

A sergeant supervising the police coverage complained in a report that the event was "severely understaffed." But police administrators who assigned 46 officers to the concert said the problems did not arise from a shortage of personnel.

During the night, police did have to call more officers to the Meadows for reinforcement, pulling them from the patrol division, the Frog Hollow and Asylum Hill units and the police Disorder Control Team.

"It was immediately apparent that the detail was insufficient for the venue. Members of the crowd were under the influence of drugs or liquor which contributed to the violence that erupted between them," Sgt. Paul Cherniack wrote in a police report. "Officers attempted to quell large-scale fights but it became futile as the officers were immediately drawn into the crowd having to defend themselves."

Hartford police determine the level of staffing for Meadows concerts based on a system that evaluates the type of behavior associated with a concert crowd, and anticipated attendance.

"We felt the event staffing was sufficient. Had the fence not been breached, the level of problems would have not escalated. But it is rare to have a concert of that size that is free of any public safety issues," Deputy Chief Thomas F. O'Connor said.

Police initially assigned 31 officers to the concert; 15 more were added when it was learned the video screens would not be on during the concert. Pearl Jam did not want its performance videotaped. But when police were sent to hold back the crowd at the theater's perimeter, the concertgoers on the lawn were able to rush a barricade that was separating them from the shed seating.

"Part of the barricade came down, and there was an automatic rush of people through it," said Jim Koplík, co-owner of the Meadows.

Koplík said ticket holders had been sent letters alerting them that the video screens on the lawn would not be used for the Pearl Jam show. After learning Thursday that people had tried to scale the outside chain-link fence, Koplík said the Meadows will respond to such breaches in security.

"We're going to build a stronger perimeter fence, and we'll put more security along the perimeter. That's how we'll prevent it from now on," Koplík said.

Meanwhile, several of the people arrested on charges of disorderly conduct, breach of peace or interfering with police had their criminal charges reduced to an infraction, and they were fined for creating a public disturbance. The Pearl Jam fans were released from custody, however, only after they faced some pointed questions from Hartford Superior Court Judge Howard Scheinblum:

"How did you get to like Pearl Jam?" he asked one.

"How many beers did you drink last night?" he asked another.

And, when one muscular college senior, who was at least 6 feet tall, stood before him, Scheinblum remarked: "They should have used you for security."