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Casa de Oro Youth and Residents Seek Answers

November 6, 2015 (Casa de Oro) -- Efforts of local teens with the East County Youth Coalition have spurred action with residents and business owners in Casa de Oro. What started as a neighborhood assessment of 12 of the 19 licensed alcohol businesses on Campo Road by the teens has led to questions by community members. They want to know why businesses and property owners are not meeting business standards related to advertising, trash, graffiti and loitering.

The diverse group met for the first time late September. Now they are closely examining options for improving their community's quality of life. Another meeting is planned for Thursday, November 12 at 6 p.m in the Casa de Oro Library.

Please contact IPS - East County Community Change Project at 619-476-9100 x109 for more information.

Residents already knew the corridor had been deteriorating through the years. It took the actions of a few committed high school students to bring new energy to the issue. The group's forefront concerns were the smoke shops, numerous liquor stores and abandoned buildings. Couches and other unwanted items negligently dumped are commonplace on the south side of Campo Road according to attendees.

Community residents who want change are asking a lot of questions. "Why are we becoming the dumping ground for these types of businesses?" asked Laura McGrew, who has lived in the

neighborhood for 10 years and serves as president of the Parent Teacher Student Association at Spring Valley Middle School.

"I am tired of all the new smoke shops and alcohol licenses. We don't understand how it is possible for a hookah lounge to also have an alcohol license. Isn't there an ordinance to limit smoke shops, marijuana dispensaries and liquor stores by schools?" McGrew asked.

Even more pressing, most questions relayed concern about the types of businesses showing up in the neighborhood, and the fact that residents seem to have little to no voice on what kinds of businesses are setting up shop near their schools and churches.

The initial group of 15 has grown since last month. The second meeting held on October 8, 2015 at the Casa de Oro library almost filled the room to capacity with 42 residents who came to learn more about what they can do and who can help them.

Resources were brought in by the Institute of Public Strategies (IPS), a community-based organizing agency that helps communities address public health and safety problems related to alcohol and other drugs which impact also the quality of life of residents. IPS also sponsors the East County Youth Coalition that collected the data released at the first community meeting in September.

County officials were present from the San Diego Sheriff's Department, the San Diego County Planning and Development Services Department, and the San Miguel Fire District. They each faced an outpour of questions sometimes heated with frustration.

"We are all responsible for our own property," stated Steve Murray, Supervisor, San Diego County Code Compliance Team within the County Planning and Development Services Department. "It's the owner's responsibility to keep the property in shape."

Murray also explained there is not a lot that eight code enforcement officers are able to do with 4300 square miles of county land to attend to and 4000 open cases. In the past, Murray said, the Code Compliance Team maintained 22 code enforcement officers. It wasn't clear why the staffing numbers have been diminished.

What did become clear was the level of frustration with disgruntled residents who are planning next steps and securing the appropriate information to get rid of the blight.

"This is not the friendly pleasant place it used to be," said one attendee. The rest of the room nodded their heads in agreement.

Dale Swan, from the Casa de Oro Business Association shared his frustration. "Every night there is a new death because of alcohol. Where's the line that can be drawn so there isn't so much access to alcohol? Our kids are growing up seeing this all the time. We're splashing it all around them."