

New Study Highlights Live Oak's Challenges, Needs

LIVE OAK

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by Aldwin Fajardo

A new report about the challenges faced by Live Oak, a community of more than 25,000 people — more than Capitola and Scotts Valley residents combined — attempts to claim its position as Santa Cruz County's forgotten child.

"Live Oak: A Community Snapshot" is a needs assessment report authored by Elizabeth Schilling and Erika Hearon — presented a laundry list of issues that confront the third largest populated area in Santa Cruz County. Schilling and Hearon are co-directors of the Live Oak Family Resource Center, a nonprofit program of Community Bridges.

"Live Oak doesn't have many opportunities to have its story told. We want the stories of our families to influence policies and ultimately address the community's actual needs," Schilling said. "There are serious issues that need to be addressed such as housing, cost of living, public safety, education and health care."

The study suggests some 14 percent of Live Oak children are from low-income families. Additionally, the report asserts that there is only one health clinic in the area — the RotaCare Clinic operated by volunteer doctors two hours per week.

However, the study authors also drew the Live Oak northern boundary at the freeway, instead of extending the Live Oak borders through the northern portion of the township. Had they included all of Live Oak, as many define the unincorporated community, then they would have counted lots of physician offices, surgery centers, clinics, outpatient laboratories and radiology facilities and Dominican's and Sutter's primary hospital campus, according to County Supervisor Jan Beautz.

"While I intend to comment on some of the specifics of the report at a later date, my general comment is that they segmented the community by just studying the part of Live Oak south of the freeway. The rest of Live Oak includes such services as the two hospitals and a good number of the medical offices in the county," she said.

In fact, Beautz believes the way the boundaries are drawn also skews the income statistics.

"I would also think that including the northern part of Live Oak would have affected the income and financial figures," Beautz added.

The report lamented that the lack of solid health information makes it harder for community leaders to assess if existing services match the residents' needs.

"We write a lot of grants for this area and some-

times we don't qualify because we can't document, for example, the obesity rate of our children," Schilling said. "We don't have the information to back our efforts in getting resources for the community. Collection of data is a first step to make it easier to identify particular things we might do to increase our chance of drawing together a community plan."

A Community of Mixed Incomes

Likely nowhere else in the county does such diversity of housing and families live in close proximity as Live Oak. Literally, million-dollar homes crowd next to federally sponsored low-income rental housing, creating significant diversity in populations.

Schilling claims poverty has become a more serious problem in the community, citing a comparative analysis of median household income between Live

instrument to encourage people to talk about real issues and come together as a community in drawing a plan that works for all of us," Zavala added.

Public Safety Takes Center Stage

Dean Lundholm, also a Live Oak resident, expressed concerns on the state of peace and order in the community in reference to a Jan. 29 incident wherein a 16-year-old boy shot an unsuspecting bicyclist on 17th Street.

"Public safety is one of the most pressing issues we face in Live Oak today given the increasing number of street violence and the extent of aggression that we have recently seen," he said.

The needs assessment study revealed that the Sheriff's Office staffing ratio for Live Oak is less than one officer for every 1,000 residents, which is far below the national average of 1.9 officers per 1,000 people.

Live Oak shares the service provided by the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office with all unincorporated areas from Davenport to Freedom.

Considering the extent of violent crimes reported in Live Oak, which accounted for 33 percent of the County's overall statistics in 2007, Zavala underscored the need for increased police presence in the community.

"The figures also necessitate the creation of gang prevention programs such as after-school activities for kids and teens," said Zavala, who lost three of his five closest friends to drugs- and gang-related violence. "We've got to do something to keep our kids out of the streets and the needs assessment report gives us a clear view of where to start."

No Place Like Home

The report, according to Aaron Spencer, offers a comprehensive view of the Live Oak community today.

"It empowers us to take concrete steps to resolve the problems we face. I am more involved in the issue of housing and its accessibility particularly to the neediest segment of the community," Spencer said.

Figures from the Santa Cruz County Planning Department disclosed that Live Oak has a high concentration of Section 8 low-income housing, especially compared with the other unincorporated areas of the county.

The community is also home to one of the larger concentrations of mobile homes in the region, approaching 2,000 in total number.

"The ultimate goal is to be able to make housing affordable to people who need a roof over their heads," said Spencer. ■



From left: Community leaders Jorge Zavala, Elizabeth Schilling, Aaron Spencer and Dean Lundholm leaf through the needs assessment report authored by Schilling and Erika Hearon, co-directors of the Live Oak Family Resource Center.

Oak and the city of Santa Cruz during the period 1990-2000. In 1990, Live Oak's median household income of \$31,541 was just \$316 less than the city of Santa Cruz's \$31,857. The income gap widened to \$5,641 by end-December 2000.

Based on 2000 statistics, the percentage of children living below poverty line is higher in Live Oak at 14.4 percent compared with the county's 13.3 percent and the city of Santa Cruz's 13.4 percent, according to the report. Again, these comparisons were based on the adjusted boundaries.

Live Oak community activist Jorge Zavala said the needs assessment report is a powerful tool to engage residents into discussing important issues, which they ultimately hope to present to the county's board of supervisors.

"The report brings to life everything that's wrong about Live Oak. We intend to use this report as an