

Residents will plead for Aptos patrols

County budget hearings begin

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APTOS — Residents of Aptos are eager for their chance to appeal for more police protection tonight.

Hundreds who live in this comfortable community are expected to turn out for the opening day of budget hearings for Santa Cruz County.

"We'll fire our best shot," said Ron Severson, spokesman for the recently formed Aptos Community Alliance and principal of Aptos High School.

The group's goal is to get three of the five members of the Board of Supervisors to support a program aimed at making their town safer.

The battle cry first sounded earlier in the year when the usually peaceful community was hit by a rash of burglaries. Thieves broke into more than 20 homes in December and January.

While Severson remains optimistic, he knows it won't be easy to convince budget-conscious supervisors to approve a new program estimated to cost \$200,000.

Supervisor Walt Symons, the Aptos-area representative, has been supportive of the effort to increase the number of deputies in the community.

Symons, however, has made it clear that residents will have to make their case tonight.

"You must be seen to make a change," Symons told the group at a meeting last month. "Government only reacts to people."

He pointed out how hundreds of marijuana supporters cared enough about their cause to jam the Supervisors Chamber.

Other supervisors, however, have shown less enthusiasm for a program that won't benefit their own districts.

Board Chairman Gary Patton made it clear that the money isn't there, Severson said.

Patton could not be reached for comment Friday.

His colleague on the board Jan Beautz maintains a wait-and-see attitude.

"I want to see how the whole budget fits together before making

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a decision," said Beautz, who represents the Live Oak area.

The alliance has proposed funding the Aptos program through Proposition 172 — the half-cent public-safety sales tax approved in November.

Santa Cruz County is expected to receive \$9.6 million from the tax. Several officials, however, have wondered if that money is available or if it is a "wash" for money lost in state budget cuts.

Symons wondered if the funds were just "smoke and mirrors."

"It is silly to say we can't afford to make this a safe place for the residents of Santa Cruz County," said Severson. "How can we say that?"

District Attorney Art Danner said he also is quite concerned about how the

money gets disbursed.

"The essential question is what we're going to do with the 172 money and what the priorities are, when it comes time for whether the people are getting what they bargained for when they voted for 172," Danner said. The DA's Office also plans to lobby the board for using the funds to fight crime, he said.

At the request of the citizen group, officials from the sheriff's, probation, and parks departments developed proposals to reduce crime, especially those involving juveniles.

The result is a plan pushed by the alliance to add two deputies, a probation officer to work with Aptos schools and open school gymnasiums for night basketball and other programs.

The region is currently staffed by one

deputy with a second who roves between Aptos and Watsonville.

According to a Sheriff's Office plan, nearly 2,000 crimes were reported in Aptos last year, including 165 residential burglaries and 177 cases of vandalism.

A 19-year-old Watsonville man was shot at Manresa State Beach near Aptos last week and later died. Four suspects were arrested.

"There are kids dying," Severson said.

Much of the crime in town comes at the hands of juveniles, according to law enforcement officials.

The crime isn't committed by kids from outside, but the community's own, officials said.

"It is clear that the Aptos beat suffers

from a lack of deputies to attend to its unique problems regarding young people, unpatrolled neighborhoods and a large commercial population," said a report prepared by Chief Deputy Wally Walker.

If the program is successful, it can be used in other neighborhoods, according to Severson.

"It's not just Aptos," he said. "Why aren't we doing this in Soquel and San Lorenzo Valley?"

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to discuss next year's criminal justice budget and the Aptos Community Alliance proposal at 7:30 tonight at the board's chamber, Fifth Floor, County Governmental Center, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.

For more information, call 454-2100.