

No quick fix for gang woes in Watsonville

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STAFF WRITER

There's no easy solution to Watsonville's gang problem, but even a little help would be a step in the right direction, the City Council was told last night.

After hearing from a school administrator and representatives of two youth-counseling agencies that the gang issue urgently needs attention, the council asked City Manager John Radin to draft a proposal to hire a gang-intervention specialist.

Radin is expected to present the proposal at the council's May 9 meeting, five days after the council gets its first look at a budget that will require serious cuts if it is to be balanced.

Ron Kinninger, supervisor of child welfare and attendance for the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, delivered an impassioned plea to the council, saying that if gang violence isn't thwarted, the impact will be felt throughout the community.

"If violence erupts it will depreciate property values ... my kids won't be safe on the street," Kinninger said. He drew an analogy between Watsonville's agricultural character and the need to pay attention to the development of youth. Without that attention, he said, "you can't get that bountiful harvest."

Watsonville's gang problem had "gone into remission" in the mid-1980s, Kinninger said, but now is back.

"My eyes have been opened in the last year" by a number of violent gang activities, Kinninger said. The violence has included a murder in front of the city library and several drive-by shootings, including three this month.

In the late '70s and early '80s, there were two gangs in the city. Now, there are six, with the North Side and Poor Side gangs the most prominent.

The gang issue has come up at several council meetings, and the Police Department has stepped up its efforts to prevent violence and arrest offenders. Two weeks ago, two officers were taken off their regular duties. In December, the city applied for a state anti-gang grant which would have provided \$32,000 to fund the gang-intervention specialist. The

funds were limited, and cities with more severe gang problems got the money.

Two weeks ago, Councilman Dennis Osmer asked the council to consider funding the position, acknowledging that the city is facing a number of cuts to balance the budget.

The youth-gang problems in Southern California "are being exported to Northern California," Kinninger said. The price of illegal drugs is depressed in the southern part of the state, Kinninger said, so drug dealers are bringing their wares northward. Much of the drug trade is headed for the San Francisco Bay Area, but some of it is reaching Salinas and Watsonville on the way up, he said.

"Our youth are ripe for the picking," Kinninger said. "The young people have a certain impatience. They'll take to the street. They can be very violent."

Referring to the fact that all of Watsonville's youth gangs are made up of Hispanics, Kinninger said, "We can't say it's 'their problem,'" that is, "a Hispanic problem."

That brought a response from Mayor Betty Murphy, who said, "I don't think anybody on the council has ever said it's 'their problem.'"

Murphy described with some shock what she had seen in recent visits to elementary schools in town. "First-graders were mimicking the gangs," Murphy said.

Watsonville is still in a position where it can be in a "preventive mode" against gang violence, Kinninger said, saying cuts in the recreation or police budgets could be "very detrimental."

His comments were supported by Bill Zaragoza, program manager for high-risk youth for Fenix Services, a non-profit agency in Watsonville.

The gang problems that were prevalent a decade ago are happening again because not enough attention was paid to prevention, Zaragoza said.

Without prevention, the gang problem will end up costing society in the future, he said.

"If they're incarcerated or on drugs, how are they going to pay our Social Security?" he asked.

Zaragoza said a team approach is needed, involving police, social workers, educators and the clergy. A committee of people who deal with youth has already been meeting on the gang issue, but a gang-intervention specialist would be able to work on the matter full time.

Susie Sabala, who works in the school district's child welfare and attendance office, summed up the problem when she said one of her grandchildren "is afraid to go to high school next year because of the gang problem."

REFERENCE

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