

Beach FLATS

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CHANGE COMES, SLOWLY

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Iliana Ortega swings a happy tune on an old playground set on Liebrandt Street in Beach Flats.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

City, residents try to make a difference

By MARTHA MENDOZA
Sentinel staff writer

FOR MORE than a decade, residents of the drug- and poverty-plagued Beach Flats neighborhood in Santa Cruz have asked city officials for help. This year, the city heard their pleas.

More than \$700,000 of public money has been allocated for programs there. Changes from just 12 months ago in the small neighborhood are visible:

- More police officers walk the streets, pushing out drug dealers;
- Gang violence has dropped and calls to police are down;
- Sidewalks and parks are cleaner, and a new mural graces one wall;
- Ground has been broken for a half-acre community garden; and,
- The Familia Center, a non-profit community support agency, has re-opened.

"I'm not saying everything is perfect there now, but there is less drug dealing and things do seem a little better. Between all of us, we must be doing something right," said Barrios Unidos director Daniel "Nane" Alejandro.

There are those in Beach Flats who disagree.

"People think it's getting better down there, but actually it's get-

ting worse," said resident Robin Wolf, citing crime as the most significant problem.

Beach Flats is a 25-acre triangle bound by Riverside Avenue, Beach Street, the San Lorenzo River and the Boardwalk, the city's multimillion-dollar tourist attraction. About 1,200 people live in about 300 homes and apartments — 96 percent of the residents are renters.

More than 80 percent of the residents are Hispanic immigrants, and almost all the homes are headed by women. They live in cramped, dilapidated housing, and work menial jobs if they can work at all. In homes once designed for summer tourists, the residents of Beach Flats average three people to a room.

The median household income is about \$13,000 a year, less than half the city average.

The population has doubled in the past decade. During that time, the area became a safe haven for drug dealers, prostitutes and gang members. It got to the point where drug dealers were competing for space on the sidewalks, blatantly hawking their goods.

As long as the criminal activity stayed within the limits of the neighborhood, government was willing to ignore it, said Gloria Nieto, who heads the Familia

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BEACH FLATS REVISITED



A struggle for change

SPECIAL REPORT

Just over a year ago, the Sentinel's Bay Living section produced a special report on the troubled Beach Flats neighborhood. That report focused on the children living in the area, which is adjacent to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk amusement park.

Today's follow-up report, which continues on pages C1-C2, is about what has happened in the past year or so - and about the many things that still need to be done.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Officer Rudy Escalante now spends a lot of time on the beat in Beach Flats.

Life in the Flats with Lola Padilla

By PEGGY R. TOWNSEND
Sentinel staff writer

LOLA PADILLA eases herself into a lawn chair and settles down for an evening on her front porch.

In front of her, children play ball in the street. They run to the sidewalk as cars zoom toward them, then dash back, almost before the cars' bumpers have passed by.

It is the most dangerous thing going on in Beach Flats.

A year ago, the view was much different. A year ago, Lola could sit on her porch and watch drug dealers selling cocaine and heroin from the very spots where the children are playing.

A year ago, young prostitutes wandered down the street, selling themselves for \$20.

A year ago, the prospect of a gang fight in the Flats hung in the air.

Slowly, things are changing. The housing is still bad, and from where Lola sits, she can see a two-bedroom house where 21 people live. But there is a different feeling here.

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