

Quiet

REVOLUTION

Local crime may be the topic of the summer, but Santa Cruz Neighbors is ready to fight back « BY PATRICK DWIRE

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There was just something “not quite right” about that funky, old Toyota camper truck that suddenly began parking on and around Branciforte Avenue in Santa Cruz. Driven by a particularly unnerving gentleman, this dilapidated vehicle began to upset and disturb its newly adopted neighbors. Then, one of them decided to do something about it.

The first few calls they made were to the police department’s non-emergency line. But this approach didn’t exactly bring the boys in blue rushing to the scene. They were told that as the camper truck had the parking rules pretty well wired—there wasn’t much the police force could do to clear out what the residents and neighbors felt to be a mobile menace.

But Santa Cruz Police Officer Jim Howe told the concerned neighbor to take their worries to an organization called Santa Cruz Neighbors (SCN). The Branciforte homeowner, who would like to remain anonymous, went to the group’s monthly meeting and met with Karina Rogers, the police officer responsible for patrolling the Midtown beat. Interestingly enough, the officer was acutely aware of the camper truck, and, armed with some new information, Rogers promised to look into the matter.

Weeks passed. After walking a friend back to her car parked in the Albertson’s parking lot on Soquel Avenue after a dinner party, the Branciforte resident spied the familiar-looking camper truck in the center of a huge, well-lit crime scene surrounded by police cars, yellow caution tape, and fire trucks. What the police discovered was shocking. The camper was a mobile methamphetamine lab. After a hazardous materials crew cleaned up the mess, the unwelcome trailer was finally towed away.

What sparked the sudden turn of

events? The quiet revolution in local politics spearheaded by Santa Cruz Neighbors.

The group, which has very little to do with politics, per se, and everything to do with pragmatic problem solving at the neighborhood level is growing. And its influence and participation in municipal affairs has been quiet, cooperative and remarkably civil.

Santa Cruz Neighbors is a homegrown, city-wide network of concerned citizens and homeowners that provides information, support and problem-solving skills to residents and the 25 extant neighborhood groups scattered throughout town. According to Debbie Elston, who founded the group along with Lynn Robinson and Michael Bethke, residents from the Beach Flats area to High Street, from Seabright to Harvey West, are getting increasingly better organized on a grassroots, neighbor-to-neighbor basis. And its To-Do list is clearly mapped out: Fight crime, break up homeless camps, clean up neighborhoods, focus community pressure on “problem properties,” and make clear that some highly questionable activities, like drug dealing and vagrancy, will not be tolerated in neighborhoods.

Over the past year, Elston has seen an increase of participation in neighborhood associations, as well as the monthly meetings hosted by SCN. One trend that has emerged is that residents from the Upper Westside to the Banana Belt are facing the same kinds of problems. Along with providing the information and contacts people need, and trying to prevent neighbors from “re-inventing the wheel when they get together to solve a problem,” Elston notes that SCN is about “empowering neighbors with the resources they need and to help them realize they can make change happen in their own neighborhoods.”

■ THE NEW REALITY

The increased influence of organized neighbors is part of the socio-economic maturation of the Central Coast. Santa Cruz may have a reputation as being one of the most progressive, environmentally protective towns on the California coast, but this beautiful coastal town is essentially built-out—any increase in density or crime is going to be noticed. There is just no place left for “impacts” to go.

The number of people within the roughly 12 square miles inside the city limits of Santa Cruz city has more than doubled since 1960.

After a huge growth spurt in the decade following the opening of UC Santa Cruz, the city added thousands of rental units and

neighborhood associations, with the help of SCN, are reclaiming and stabilizing locales in which the illusive and multifaceted factors making up overall “quality of life” has deteriorated.

But this increase in the political clout of neighborhood associations raises multiple and troubling dilemmas. If the city is evolving into a balkanized alliance of neighborhoods, all organized to play a defensive, zero-sum game of protecting their own turf against encroachment by city-wide problems—like homelessness, or the need for high density affordable housing—how is the city going to unite for common goals? And are there, in fact, any city-wide goals most people can agree on apart from preserving and protecting their own neighborhoods?

Unusual for Santa Cruz is that the growing influence and participation of Santa Cruz Neighbors in municipal affairs has been quiet, cooperative, and remarkably civil.

many homeowners found it very profitable to become absentee landlords. Owner-occupied home ownership dropped from 64 percent of the housing stock in 1960 to 53 percent in 1970. According to planning documents, renters began outnumbering homeowners in 1976. By 1980 only 47 percent of the city’s housing stock was owner-occupied. That percentage has stayed relatively constant to the present day.

Over the course of a generation, many Santa Cruz neighborhoods changed from stable, mostly locally employed, owner-occupied neighborhoods to more transient, crowded and rental-dominated ones. Now,

City Manager Dick Wilson, a 26-year veteran of Santa Cruz local politics, in a discussion about the housing crunch at the height of the last wave of gentrification preceding the 2000 dot.com crash, was quoted by the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* as saying, “It seems like we’re becoming the Palo Alto of the Monterey Bay area and there is nothing we can do. The trends that are in place are bigger than any counter trends that any local government can enact. We’re not controlling this beast. The best we can do is nibble at its heels a bit.”

■ WATCHING FROM THE WINDOWS

Nibbling at the heels of the beast of growth, as well as taking on the often scary challenges of confronting street crime and blighted "nuisance properties," is exactly what SCN is helping neighborhood associations to do. But their most commonly sought-after advice might be the ability of regular residents to improve personal safety and report crime so that it gets a reaction from the police department.

Law enforcement officials say the increasing number of active neighborhood associations is unquestionably beneficial in terms of neighbors getting to know each and looking out for each other, increasing the number of eyes on the street, and increasing the willingness of neighbors to go on the record and report criminal behavior.

But the increasing coverage of "Neighborhood Watch" organizations beg the question of where the lines need to be drawn between protecting a neighborhood and harassing those who may look like they "just don't belong" in it. Further delineation may also be made between the needs of well-meaning residents trying to clean up a neighborhood and neurotic neighbors with a grudge, wishing to make life miserable for a resident they don't like.

Civil rights and privacy issues are always at stake when non-professionals assume roles in law enforcement, yet the Santa Cruz Police Department, like police departments across the country, say they can't do their jobs of providing neighborhood safety without the support and cooperation of the area's residents.

On this point SCN operates under the assumption that the vast majority of Santa Cruz residents—both renters and homeowners—find it unacceptable to have unknown homeless persons sleeping in their backyards. Nor do most Santa Cruz residents think that drug dealing, prostitution, or public drunkenness on their street corners or in their neighborhood parks are acceptable. Most residents are also united in their

opposition to the piles of garbage, human waste and junk left on vacant lots or around dumpsters.

By enabling neighborhoods to do something about these problems, the accusations of harassing the homeless or profiling poor people or encouraging Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) elitism fade to irrelevance in the eyes of the founders of SCN.

"These problems are citywide," says Michael Bethke, one of SCN's founders. "But they have proven neighborhood-driven solutions. Is it fair to call me a NIMBY because I want a safe neighborhood? I don't think so. Your neighborhood, my neighborhood, everybody's neighborhood, should be a sanctuary where you feel safe."

Officer Howes takes the view that whether neighborhood problems stem from a succession of rowdy, careless college-age tenants or absentee landlords milking the cash cows of overcrowded units, "I try to emphasize that, at the end of the day, we still have to be neighbors, and we should seek out solutions together.

"We try to start low on the ladder of legal action that can be taken, and give them [the identified problem property owner or tenants] ways to comply with cleaning up their act before taking the next step," he adds. "This can be as simple as getting written affidavits from neighbors about the situation and then contacting the property owner about the problem. Just by informing an absentee landlord about the number of police calls his property has been subject to—and the complaints the neighbors have about the behavior of his tenants—will often solve the problem. But sometimes it takes more."

For example, it could be a small claims suit filed by the neighbors, or criminal abatement measures taken by the police department, both of which have been actions supported by SCN. "It has to start with the neighbors," Howes says. "The police department simply doesn't have the resources to do it all, like undercover drug buys and long-term surveillance."

Sign of Our Crimes

On Monday July 24, Santa Cruz Neighbors and the Santa Cruz Police Department facilitated a community conversation about the recent spate of gang-related violence that has plagued the city. The meeting, which featured both a question and answer section as well as regional breakout groups was as heated as the stuffy atmosphere, with Police Chief Howard Skerry doing his best to dispel residents' concerns about public drug use, trespassing and police response times.

In his opening remarks, Chief Skerry explained that the department services around 70,000 calls annually and that its patrol force of 94 officers is down 28 percent of full strength due to injuries. He also helped explain how to get extra attention and resources assigned to their neighborhoods, namely, by making contact with each of the department's beat lieutenants.

While proudly proclaiming that his Investigations Department has already collared two suspects, Antonio Hernandez and Cindy Diego Garcia, in the July 16 shooting incident that left Larry Allen Burrow of Fresno dead and his uncle seriously wounded on the corner of Third Street

and Riverside Drive, he mentioned that the single biggest impediment to stopping gang violence is a lack of information. "We've faced a total lack of cooperation," he said to the overflowing crowd.

"We had a party with almost 400 people [on July 8] when several vehicles were vandalized and one set on fire with a 19-year-old Soquel resident inside of it and nobody saw anything."

Public questions addressed multiple incidents, including an attack on Chestnut Street, vandalized cars on Swift Street and the fear of retribution for coming forward to inform on gang activities. But perhaps the most emotionally charged moment came when Marciano Cruz, a coordinator of the Liga De La Comunidad at Depot Park and local activist took the microphone to say that the best way to deter youths from the gang lifestyle is to reach out to them. "They really just need someone to say that they care about their future."

With a majority of the city council present as well as dozens of law enforcement officials and city workers, the event was a powerful display of Santa Cruz Neighbor's growing political clout. Whether or not this meeting will do anything to address Santa Cruz's long-standing problem with gang activity remains to be seen. But more importantly, this meeting could be seen as the ultimate test of Santa Cruz Neighbor's mission—will it address the root causes of anti-social behavior, or just push it into the next neighborhood over? ■



"I don't see working with my neighbors to improve my neighborhood as trying to defend my property or defend my turf. I see it as giving back to the community. If we don't talk to our neighbors it's a sin of omission. You become part of the problem by trying to ignore it. This town has been good to me, and working with my neighbors is my way of giving something back." —JD Sotelo

Robinson says that SCN has hosted annual town hall meetings intentionally designed to bring key community leaders together, often for the first time, to discuss real neighborhood issues with residents and forge alliances for solutions.

For example, two years ago, SCN hosted a panel discussion about young people and neighborhood crime with the superintendent of the Santa Cruz City School District, UCSC's chancellor, and the city's chief of police.

"That had never been done before," Robinson says, "and because we're not some city-sponsored task force or committee affiliated in some way with city council politics, we have real credibility with the neighbors and with our partners. We're about breaking down bureaucratic barriers, and finding out who is responsible for what, and getting things done.

"Take, for example, people living in what seems to be an illegal unit who have frequent visitors who park badly and irritate their

neighbors with suspicious or obnoxious behavior and/or loud music. An increase in local burglaries is suspected to be linked to this residence. Neighbors are usually stumped when confronting a problem of this size. Is it a police matter? One for code enforcement?

This sort of thing is SCN's forte.

Elston, Robinson and Officer Howes all agree that one of the key contributions of the group is preventing the "ping-ponging" of a problem from one city department to the another, where jurisdictional responsibility may be somewhat fuzzy. An example of the growing clout it has in city hall was the round of congratulations it got from city council members for working with city staff to iron out new, expanded public noticing requirements for new real estate developments throughout the city.

"Neighbors don't like surprises, and the old public noticing procedures were often inadequate for neighbors to know what was getting approved in their own neighborhoods," Elston says. The new ordinance extends the time, the radius of mailed notification, and the size of public notices on the site.

"This is a big deal and a major change to the planning code," Councilmember Ryan Coonerty said at the second hearing for the ordinance on June 27. "It's been great to see the collaboration of planning staff with the Santa Cruz Neighbors."

■ DO NOT DISTURB?

But not all of SCN's legislative efforts have been met with such unanimous approval. Last year, Councilmember Mike Rotkin, with the help and support of SCN, spearheaded the adoption of the "Unruly Gathering Ordinance." This newly minted section of the municipal code specified definitions and legal sanctions, including fines against tenants and landlords, for out-of-control, late-night parties that wreak havoc in many neighborhoods.

This ordinance came on the heels of SCN working closely with UCSC in crafting a "Good Neighborhood Policy," which was formally adopted by the UC Board of Trustees, and committed the university to paying more attention to the negative impacts students can have on the neighborhoods—including out-of-control parties.

But does it always work?

"I definitely felt I was judged and discriminated against because I am a student," says Suzanne King, 26, a senior at UCSC. "Here I am, a slightly older returning student who doesn't smoke. I have great credit and good references, but it took me over three months to finally find a place. I don't even like loud, huge parties where no one knows each other and don't go to them, but I could tell some landlords didn't even look at my application."

Laura Ferri, a second-year Theater Arts and Linguistics major at UCSC, relates a story of a cast party after a final production she



JOSHUA BECKER

SCN's JD Sotelo, Michael Bethke and Lynn Robinson take command.



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■ WORKING THE CITY

SCN founders can see their success. In addition to helping provide tools, contacts and support to neighbors to deal with particular problems, it has built partnerships over the last several years, primarily between city staff and various neighborhood associations, along with UCSC, the Locally Owned Business Alliance, Santa Cruz City School District and the Santa Cruz Police Department.

"We're doing a lot more than simply encouraging neighborhood watch-type, anti-crime groups around town," says Lynn Robinson, who in addition to her duties as part of SCN is also serving on the Santa Cruz General Plan Advisory Committee and running for one of the three open seats on the Santa Cruz City Council in the Nov. 7 election.

"We've basically been involved in building the capacity of both neighbors who come to us for help with specific problems, as well as the capacity of city staff to work better with neighborhoods and improve the delivery of city services," Robinson explains. "We're not a single-issue type organization. We've worked with the Redevelopment Agency, which is funding graffiti abatement, we've worked with the police department to clean up known drug houses and homeless camps, and we've worked with city staff to beef up the Neighborhood Services Team."

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attended, which Ferri thought was a relatively tame party for "crazy theater arts majors," but the party was "stomped on" and shut down by Santa Cruz Police promptly at 11 p.m.

"I was pretty disappointed. I thought the neighbors were a little uptight. We weren't out of control, and they could have at least asked us to quiet down before calling the police. I was like, 'Fine, I'll go home, but I think you're sort of over-reacting.'"

"The point I'd like to make is this," says Ferri. "Of course there are irresponsible students. But there are a lot of students who party much like adults—without a lot of excess or getting out of control. That is simply not recognized as a possibility by some neighbors, and by some student authorities."

But, on the other hand, police arrived not a minute too soon at a recent party on the Westside that truly went out of control. While investigating a rash of disturbances around West Cliff Drive on Saturday, July 8, police came upon a huge party with an estimated 300 people in the vicinity of Swift Street. Luckily, a few of the party-goers pointed out a van that had just been set on fire. After forcing the vehicle open, officers pulled out a 19-year old woman, who was apparently intoxicated and had passed out in the back of the van only moments before it was engulfed in flames. Officers from County Sheriff's Office, UC Police and Highway Patrol were called to assist in breaking up the party up and securing the crime scene of the van, which was investigated for arson.

MENDING FENCES

J.D. Sotelo, the key facilitator of the Neighbors of Lower Ocean group and an active member of SCN, has worked long and hard cleaning up one of the most difficult, traffic- and crime-impacted neighborhoods in the city. He speaks from a good deal of experience of the neighbor-to-neighbor, building-to-building, hands-on approach to improving neighborhoods, and has been at it so long on lower Ocean Street that he becomes somewhat philosophical in his pragmatism.

Sotelo is convinced that one of the biggest challenges in improving a neighborhood "is the simple act of walking over to your neighbor and talking about problems you're having. It's amazing sometimes the lengths people will go to to avoid having a conversation about a problem," he says. "It makes the person who makes the approach vulnerable. The other guy can just walk away, or worse. But the neighborhood is your business, and sometimes it's real hard for neighbors to talk to each other."

Even in the upper Westside, which apart from elevation is about as far as you can get from Lower Ocean, this is a fact of life. "Most people want to be good neighbors and will live with a problem for years before seeking help with it," Debbie Elston notes.

Sotelo says that there is real value in just trying to explain to the offender the negative

effects that bad behavior, broken bottles in the street or loud cars screeching out late at night, actually has on the people living in the neighborhood, and can often be the biggest hurdle to solving the problem. "Strongly encouraging negligent or immature people to pay attention to the consequences of their behavior, to take responsibility for what they are doing—without hostility, in the spirit of being neighbors—that's the way to reach people. But it's hard—and it can be scary."

In his view, the growing number of people attending SCN meetings is giving people more confidence to deal with a neighborhood problem.

Sotelo doesn't see his neighborhood activism motivated so much by the need to defend his space in a growingly crowded and expensive town; he sees it as service to a town he deeply cares for. "I don't see working with my neighbors to improve my neighborhood as trying to defend my property or defend my turf," Sotelo points out. "I see it as giving back to the community. If we don't talk to our neighbors, it's a sin of omission. You become part of the problem by trying to ignore it. This town has been good to me, and working with my neighbors is my way of giving something back." ■

Groups Associated with Santa Cruz Neighbors

- Alta Vista Neighbors
- Beach Flats Community Neighbors
- Beach Hill Association
- Carbonera Area
- Clearview Court Neighbors
- Downtown Neighbors
- Esplanade Conservancy Alliance
- Garfield Park Neighbors
- Harbor Cove Senior Commons
- Harvey West Association
- High Street Neighbors
- Lighthouse Cowells Neighbors
- Market St Neighbors
- Moore Creek Area
- Neary Lagoon Co-Op
- Neighbors of Lower Ocean (NOLO)
- Neighbors of Ocean View Avenue (NOVA)
- Nobel Drive Neighborhood
- Prospect Heights Area
- Seabright Area
- Spring Tree Association
- Upper Ocean Area
- Upper Western Dr Neighbors
- Villa de Branciforte Preservation Society
- West Cliff Drive Association
- Westlake Neighbors Association