

Mountain View VOICE

City officials join youth on teen center tour

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Hoping to find a model that might help them create the perfect teen center at Rengstorff Park, a small busload of city officials, teenagers and others took a guided tour of nearby teen centers Monday, including one in Redwood City.

The group visited three small centers in Mountain View: the Teen Zone at the Mountain View Public Library, the teen center at the Mountain View YMCA on Grant Road, and the teen rooms at the Abundant Life Christian Fellowship Church on Leghorn Avenue. The shuttle bus also traveled up Highway 101 to see the Red Morton Community Center in Redwood City, which houses a teen center.

The tour was the result of a May meeting during which Mayor Tom Means was confronted by more than 200 youths and parents calling on the city to build a teen center in Mountain View.

Mountain View's small teen center was not a part of the tour. The house on Escuela Avenue, reserved for middle school students, is only open weekend evenings and not during after-school hours, which is when teens are most likely to get into trouble, advocates say.

Unknown to many, a room called the "Teen Zone" on the first floor of the Mountain View library is reserved for teens and staffed after school and on Sundays.

"What if a youth comes and he doesn't like to read?" asked one teen. "What do they do?"

"They can talk to their friends," said children's services supervisor Karin Bricker. They can also listen to music, listen to audio books or use several Internet ready computers. Library staff members are available to explain the teen book section.

"We hope we can convince you reading is fun," Bricker said, later adding that "the library is

about choices."

Peninsula Interfaith Action had requested a stop at the Santa Clara teen center as part of the tour, saying that it was the best nearby example. But city officials thought a more fitting example was Redwood City's Red Morton center. Like the community center at Rengstorff, which may soon be rebuilt to include a teen center, the Red Morton Center is within a centrally located community park featuring a skateboard park and several playing fields.

Red Morton Center

In Redwood City, the community center boasts numerous all-ages facilities, but teens have their own space. On the center's walls are photos of its pool and ping pong champions. One youth plays a Street Fighter arcade game while others lounge on couches in an adjacent room, where a video game system is hooked to a large-screen TV.

The ambience seemed just right to some of the Mountain View teens. "Let's put this place on wheels and push it to Mountain View," one of them said.

The 34,000-square foot-center was built in the mid-1990s, using \$6.2 million mustered from the city's reserves. The community was asked to donate money for the interior pieces.

Abundant Life

Back in Mountain View, the group was in for a surprise when it visited the unassuming Abundant Life Fellowship Church building, located behind Costco on Leghorn Avenue.

Youth Pastor Kevin Neuner guided the group into the high school room (they also have a middle school room), where a dozen video game monitors hung from metal trusses, complimenting the carnival atmosphere of basketball games, Foosball tables and a professional DJ booth, where youth are known to scratch records hip-hop style during Sunday services. The three-level stage had elaborate lighting, video projection and a drum set behind a Plexiglass wall.

Few expenses were spared -- perhaps evidence of a church that has grown from 34 members to 5,000 in recent years, according to its Web site. The church seems to have created a play center for the region's youth <0x2014> or at least 350 of them.

"Jesus welcomed everybody, period," Neuner said, adding that their goal was to make the youth "lifelong disciples of Christ."

Some on the tour seemed puzzled at what to take make of the center.

"You have magnificent monies here, said RoseMary Sias Roquero, a former Mountain View Whisman trustee on the tour. How, she asked, did the church manage to afford it.

YMCA on Grant

The shuttle's last stop, at the El Camino YMCA on Grant Road, was the busiest local teen center on that Monday afternoon.

Director Tim Byrd took the group into a relatively small room hidden from view on the west end of the YMCA building. It was full of loudly yammering teens playing cards, ping pong and other games in a small outdoor area.

Teens occupy the space during after-school hours, but it has also held popular senior programs during off hours. Once a month, the teens organize their own nighttime music shows in the building. As for any trouble, "There have been no issues at all," Byrd said.

The cost to teens is \$45 a year for a program membership.