

MountainView VOICE

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Advocates say teen center would reduce crime

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Gang violence and crime in general will be substantially reduced if the city opens a larger and better teen center — that was the message put forth by a group of youth and their advocates at a community meeting last week.

The city recently purchased Rock Church, located on Escuela Avenue, and members of Youth Motivated for Action and Involvement (YMAI), part of the advocacy group Peninsula Interfaith Action, want to turn it into a teen center. So they held a public meeting at St Joseph Church on July 30 to discuss the need for a teen center in Mountain View.

At the meeting, several local teens, including some who have been involved with gangs and crime, said a center would give youth a place to hang out and a sense of belonging. In effect, they said, it would keep them off the streets.

"We are here today because we have listened to our community leaders of tomorrow and they need a safe place today," YMAI member Diana Marin told the 50 community members who gathered at St Joseph.

YMAI has been pushing for a teen center for three years. Members of the group say the city's current teen center, located on Escuela Avenue next to the Senior Center, is only open two evenings a week and does not offer enough services for youth.

After buying the church last month for \$3.5 million, City Council members said they could use it as a second parking lot for the Senior Center. They have not ruled out other uses.

"I live 30 feet from the Senior Center and I have never seen the parking lot full," Denise Olmos said during the hour-long meeting.

Her brother Eddie Olmos, who has been heading the campaign for a teen center for the last three and a half years, started the meeting by asking community members if they knew anyone who had been involved in a gang, or had been killed because of gang-related activities. Most of those present children, adults and seniors raised their hands.

Edwin Zuniga, a Los Altos High School student, said YMAI gave him a sense of belonging and purpose, and helped him change his life.

"I have a little sister and I don't want her to follow in my footsteps going through gangs," he said. "I started changing when I first joined this group. I realized how much we needed a teen center."

YMAI member Anna McMaster said that many of the city's crimes, such as auto theft and burglary, are connected to gang activity. Six of the 10 homicides from 2000 to 2008 were gang-related, she said.

The city and Police Department have some programs in place for at-risk youth, McMaster said, but "it wasn't enough."

No City Council members attended the meeting, but Mayor Margaret Abe-Koga sent a letter.

Abe-Koga told the *Voice* last week that the council has not made any decisions on how to use the new property, and will probably begin discussing the issue this fall after members return from summer recess. She added that she supported the purchase of the property and that her "priority" is using it has a teen center.

However, she said, the city is still leasing the church to its congregation until June 2011, which means teen activities there would have to happen "during non-church hours."