

Preventing future home-fire deaths

Leaders struggle to make community safer through education, possible 'amnesty' for code violations

by Andrea Moore

An "amnesty" for building and safety code violations in East Palo Alto might be one way to help prevent future fatal home fires and make homes generally safer, Councilman Duane Bay said Tuesday night at a special City Council meeting on community safety.

Bay said other possible incentives might include tax cuts for people who voluntarily request inspections of their homes.

But other council members expressed skepticism that either amnesty or incentives would do much because of concerns by many residents that other problems might be discovered in their mostly older homes.

The council, in a special meeting called by Mayor Pat Foster, struggled with how best to respond to conditions in the community that contributed to a fatal fire on Christmas Day, in which two children died in a converted garage that had only one exit. Fire officials have said that while the lack of an exit may have contributed to the deaths, the lack of smoke detectors in the home was the primary factor

in the deaths.

"I'm really concerned about the safety for families, safety for lives," Foster said. While that was echoed among her colleagues, solutions for increased safety were not easy to identify.

The council cited numerous issues involved and discussed how to bring visibility to illegal conversions, touching on the number of complaints and how they are tracked by city officials, to lack of responses to complaints and understaffing of code-enforcement positions.

"My concern is that serious health and safety issues are not coming to our attention," Bay said. "I think we need to acknowledge that we can and should do a better job."

The council took no official action, but agreed that improvements must be made to the system to improve city awareness of both the tracking and response to the complaints, especially in cases of recalcitrant offenders. The council will consider the matter again in about six weeks, they agreed.

The council also decided to explore further a community-out-

reach program, workshops, and a school program that would educate the multicultural and multilingual residents of East Palo Alto on code ordinances. The program would inform residents about where they can get free smoke detectors and educate them about financial aid programs for bringing homes up to safety codes.

Increasing fines for citizens who repeatedly ignore citations is another possibility, as well as offering amnesty from fines or penalties to those who voluntarily bring their homes or additions into compliance.

While agreeing the issue of inspections and how much leverage the city has is tangled with legislative and property rights, the council should be "challenged as policymakers to make the hard calls," Bay said.

City Attorney Michael Lawson asked, "Do we want to be punitive in the community or do we want to take an educational approach?" Council members agreed the educational approach is the first step. ■

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