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Lafayette Neighborhood Organizes to Oust Massage Parlors

By Sophie Braccini



Neighbors gather to plan their strategy. Photo Sophie Braccini

Twenty eight people gathered at Michelle Douglass' Lafayette house February 8 for their annual neighborhood meeting. But this year, something unusual was on their agenda: finding a way to close two Mt. Diablo Boulevard massage parlors. "What is going on in the two massage parlors is advertised on the internet," said Douglass. She said an online search leads to a site with the words "erotic massage" and explicit customer comments. "People would never imagine that such a thing could be happening so close to a residential neighborhood," she stated.

The only way out of the quaint neighborhood of single family homes is through the Mt Diablo Boulevard business corridor. "There are 25 children in our neighborhood," said Douglass. "We cannot tolerate having our children exposed to this kind of activity." A teenager at the meeting who walks along Mt. Diablo Boulevard after school said he had been approached by a masseuse.

Related complaints included parking (customers preferred to park on adjacent streets instead of in front of the massage parlor), and petty theft.

The business owners deny the allegations. Ken Helppie said he and his wife Eva bought their business a few days ago, and that his wife is a state certified massage therapist. He said they were here to run a legitimate business and that nothing criminal was going on. Helppie said he knew nothing about the other business. The owner of the other massage parlor said he opened his business four months ago, that he and his staff are all certified masseurs, and that he is here for the long haul.

Carlos Gomez feels inconvenienced by his neighbors on either side. Gomez owns Moises Gomez and Associates (sewing and dry cleaning). "I talked to one of my clients...she told me she was not coming anymore because of the unpleasant surroundings of my shop," he said. Some of Gomez's employees who use the restroom in the back of the store also had encounters that made them uncomfortable.

The group said that Lafayette Police had been contacted, but we were unable to get a statement from police before press time.

Other homeowner proposals included having a group of neighbors speak directly with the massage parlor owners, presenting the matter to the City Council, or hiring a private eye.

Lafayette attorney Budd MacKenzie attended the neighborhood meeting at Gomez's invitation. MacKenzie said the City may not be able to do much unless laws are being broken, but agreed to find out what could be done in the future. Lafayette currently does not require a use permit or a business license to operate a massage parlor.

Lafayette Planning and Building Manager Niroop Srivatsa confirmed MacKenzie's comments. She said massage parlors fall in the general personal services category and are permitted to operate in the commercial district. She suggested neighbors complain to code enforcement if there was a sign violation. Srivatsa said the code does not regulate hours of operation for businesses.

Orinda's Municipal Code (chapter 5.24) regulating massage parlors states that "no person shall act as a masseur, nor shall anyone employ a person as a masseur for others, who does not have a valid masseur permit. Every operator shall maintain a register of all persons so employed and their permit numbers, which register shall be available for inspection by the Chief of Police during regular business hours."

At the conclusion of the meeting, the neighbors decided to send a formal letter to the building's landlord, the business owners and to the City Council. They are also planning to have more communication with law enforcement. "We have a great neighborhood and neighbors, which is why this is so upsetting," said Douglass.

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[back](#)

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