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Party-House Drama Unfolds During Council Meeting

By Sophie Braccini

The topic was not on the March 25 meeting agenda, but neighbors organized to raise the Moraga Town Council's awareness of it. On otherwise peaceful Wandel Drive, a small residential street that connects Larch Avenue and Sanders Drive, number 14 has become party central for a group of Saint Mary's College students. Families with small children as well as longtime residents listed their grievances at the meeting until a Saint Mary's student and resident of the infamous house came to apologize and offered to open a dialogue.

Seven years ago, the council adopted an unruly party ordinance after neighbors on Thune Avenue rallied to have students renting three houses on their street brought under control. At the time, the penalty was raised to \$1,000 if the same person was cited twice over a 180-day period, and it was decided that property owners could become liable for the fine.

"This is an enormous disturbance and only warnings have been issued," said Jennifer Berk, who lives on Wandel next to the students' house with her family, including two young daughters. She believes that the high turnover at the rental is the reason a stream of warnings has not stopped the behavior. Fanny Wilson, a Saint Mary's graduate who now lives across from the house in question, listed a string of nuisances from students partying on the roof, to litter all along the road, to damage to her property.

Julie Strong asked the council for help while Jerome Sibert resubmitted a 2008 petition that neighbors signed to get some order. The neighbors reported having reached out to the police and to the college. They proposed different measures such as authorizing that only two non-related adults could live together in a residential district, or registering the legal tenants of a rental with the police, or having the police send copies of any violations to the property owner and to the college. Dino Walter, a student resident at 14 Wandel, apologized to the neighbors and the town for the past behavior and called for a conversation so both groups of residents could live side by side in peace. The council could not discuss the issue since it was not formally on the agenda. At the end of the meeting, Councilmember Dave Trotter asked Chief of Police Bob Priebe if he thought this topic needed to be revisited. After the meeting the chief explained that the 2008 ordinance gave his force tools that proved efficient on Thune. "We have a turnover problem in the (police) department," he said, "so sometimes newer officers do not have the knowledge of the situation when they respond to a call. This situation has been creating stress for the Wandel neighborhood and we let them down. There was no ill intent."

Priebe added that his department has taken steps to be more consistent, and will send letters to the owners sooner in the process. He added that he met with the college's dean of students and director of community life, and came up with several ideas to ensure earlier intervention. The chief will also look into possible changes to the existing regulation. "We know we can work this out and will try to be more proactive," he said.

The council members decided this item was a high priority and should be agendised in the near future.

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