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Bringing Down 'Hotel Wandel'

By Sophie Braccini

The infamous party house on Wandel Drive in Moraga was once again the topic of conversation at the Aug. 26 Town Council meeting, but this time it was part of a discussion regarding three amendments to the town's loud and unruly party ordinance. Chief of Police Bob Priebe, overwrought neighbors and council members all agreed that police officers needed better tools to bring a stop to when off-campus student housing becomes party central, disturbing quiet neighborhoods.

The three amendments to the ordinance would extend the timeframe between subsequent police responses from 180 days to 12 months; increase the first fine from \$100 to \$200; and codify the town's ability to enforce this in either a criminal manner or an administrative civil matter, said Priebe.

He added that now every time there is a police response to a disturbance, the property owner will also get a notice, and if a citation is issued, the property owner will also receive a citation "because they are the person responsible for what happens on their property." A new report management data system will allow police officers to pull up information showing the history of any previous loud or unruly parties at a location, thus reducing the possibility of missing when a citation should be issued for a second offense. The first violation would be considered much like a traffic ticket, while the second violation would be a misdemeanor, and would be forwarded to the district attorney for consideration.

The council requested the strengthening of the existing ordinance in June, following repetitive complaints by neighbors on Wandel Drive who for years have been seriously impacted. Saint Mary's College representatives indicated they were supportive of the new text.

One Saint Mary's student, Emily Wood, said as a student she did not want to be criminalized. "Positive reaction to negative complaints would be better than criminal action," she said. She noted that the peer council at Saint Mary's College has a rule that if someone is cited for a noise complaint, the students and neighbors are brought together for a discussion. "I think this is a more positive solution." But councilmember Phil Arth asked Saint Mary's representatives how long the peer conduct council has been in place, because if it has been going on for years, it was not working.

Megan Karbley, Saint Mary's College director of community life, said new policy sanctions were added for the 2015-16 school year, explaining that once her office is notified of a problem, including if neighbors contact her directly, the student would go through a hearing process. "Once the college is notified of a citation, a student goes through the process, starting with a meeting with the neighbors, then next to college probation, to suspension or even to expulsion," she said.

Councilmember Teresa Onoda made note that the town appreciates the college and its students, and asked Karbley if students who live off campus will get a copy of the ordinance "so they know what they're getting into." Karbley said they would ensure students are aware of the ordinance.

The bottom line seemed to revolve around trust. Jennifer Perk who is raising kids next to the infamous house, which was named "Hotel Wandel" on a Facebook page, has been to council meetings before regarding ongoing disturbances, and noted that students who were living at 14 Wandel came to earlier meetings and apologized, but 40 days later they were throwing beer cans into her yard during another party. The house has new tenants now, and parties have stopped, but Perk is concerned the new year will bring the same problems. Others who came to the meeting repeated the same litany of parties till the wee hours, many more students than listed living on the premises, students dancing on roofs, and litter in garden and the street.

"Previous efforts to enforce the ordinance haven't done the trick," Arth said.

Resident Seth Freeman said he found the new ordinance oppressive to property owners. "There are limits to what a landlord can do," he said, adding that in California it would take six months to expel a tenant. He also regretted that the ordinance did not define what groups are, or who is the responsible person in a multiple tenant situation.

Regardless, the council unanimously passed the ordinance as amended. The text will be enforceable 30 days after the second reading on Sept. 9.

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[back](#)

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