

Team mulls ideas on neighborhood woes

A task force met Thursday to brainstorm ways to curb crime and improve housing in the West University area

Danielle Gillespie

Safety/Crime/Transportation Reporter

With many run-down apartment complexes and rental houses, livability issues in the West University neighborhood have raised concerns and some have speculated that this could be part of the reason for high crime rates and riotous activities in the area.

To help prevent future problems and brainstorm ideas to improve living, a task force of community members and University officials met Thursday to discuss strategies to improve the West University

neighborhood.

ASUO Community Outreach Coordinator Jesse Harding said the task force made several suggestions for short-term and long-term goals for upgrading the area.

He said one short-term goal included having a community involvement day, where University students could clean the neighborhood and repair its parks.

Forming a database with names and addresses of the neighborhood's permanent residents to form, perhaps, a neighborhood association was another short-term goal, Harding said.

"We just want to build more community involvement from everyone," he said.

As for long-term goals, members of the group expressed concerns

about the neighborhood's lighting, especially on 14th Avenue, Associate Vice President for Institutional Affairs Jan Oliver said.

She said poor street lighting can increase crime such as theft and vandalism or cause riotous activities because darkness often leads people to think they're anonymous.

The task force also talked about the need to upgrade housing standards in the neighborhood as a long-term goal. The task force suggested that if housing were improved, it would change the overall environment of the neighborhood and could help to reduce crime and riotous activities, Oliver said.

According to an apartment report done by the Eugene appraisal firm Duncan & Brown, the campus area

currently has a vacancy rate of 2 percent. Last fall, the vacancy rate was about 0.78 percent.

The report found that property managers in Springfield and other Eugene neighborhoods have reported that the number of units rented to student tenants has increased. This is primarily true in the neighborhood near Autzen Stadium, which contains 1,450 units and is about 75 percent student-occupied.

"Clearly many students do not want to live (in the West University neighborhood), and something needs to be done," Oliver said.

Harding, who said some students don't want to live in the neighborhood because many places are dilapidated, compared the houses to sheds with slanted roofs.

"I think the vacancy rates in this area are because the places are so bad, run-down and the rent is so high that no one is willing to live there," Harding said.

University senior Aarti Tanna, who has lived in the West University neighborhood for two years, said she thinks it's hard for students to find nice housing close to campus. But Tanna said she does not see a correlation between improving housing standards, riotous activities and crime, because it's not as if improving the area will chase out the people causing the problems.

"It's mostly students who live there, and they will still be there," she said.

Contact the reporter at daniellegillespie@dailyemerald.com.



Jeremy Forrest Emerald

Judy Sylvia has been an employee at the Safeway on East 18th Avenue for more than four years. She says she will be on the picket line if workers go on strike soon for issues including pensions, wages and health care.

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Strike

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"Employers want to retain their current employees," she said. "They are the ones who are skilled."

Merrill said the employers must change health care benefits to compete with nonunion companies like Wal-Mart, which has moved into the market and increased competition. Currently, the employers pay 100 percent of employee health benefits, and it takes six months for new employees to qualify for the plan. Under the new plan, members would pay a portion and it would take two years to qualify.

The new contract also proposes that new employees be 21 or older to receive pension benefits, while currently, there is no age requirement to receive benefits.

"The employers are discriminating against young people," Sawyer said.

The UFCW 555 is also asking for a 50 cent per hour raise for all members, but the employers want to pay a lump sum, which would be five times less for full-time employees. Employers also want to nearly double the time it takes union members to reach "journeyman" status, which currently offers a wage increase after 5,200 hours of work.

Fred Meyer, Safeway and Albertsons are taking applications for temporary employees, but management hopes the issue is resolved and an agreement is reached, according to Merrill.

Many union members support a strike. Others are less sure, but hesitated in giving their names because they are worried about the repercussions of being a "strikebreaker."

East 18th Avenue Safeway cashier Rebeca Natividad said if an

agreement is not reached, a strike will be necessary.

"Safeway is trying to break the union, and they are starting in Eugene," she said. "If (the employers) break the union, we will all be working at Wal-Mart without medical (benefits) and on food stamps."

Some employees, however, are opposed to striking.

Safeway cashier and University junior Grant Leffler said he does not believe the union is calling a strike for the benefit of employees, but for a show of power. He said

"Employers want to retain their current employees."

Melinda Merrill
Northwest Food
Employers Inc.
spokeswoman

management would not agree to the union's requests.

"Safeway (management) said that's the best we could get, and if we went on strike, they would lessen benefits more," he said.

Others are not sure. An Albertsons employee who would identify himself only as "Peter" said he has not been informed enough about the matter.

"It's kind of foggy," he said. "We are stuck in the middle of this conflict."

The last Oregon grocery workers strike took place in Portland in 1994 and lasted for 88 days. The last one in Eugene was in 1979. Approximately 1,100 employees of Safeway, Albertsons and Fred Meyer are covered by UFCW 555 contracts in Eugene.

Roman Gokhman is a freelance writer for the Emerald.

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