Rising gang incidents in City Heights spark call for more police protection

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A few recent gang-related incidents in City Heights have prompted City Councilman John Hartley and business leaders on El Cajon Boulevard to call for more police protection there.

El Cajon Boulevard has long had a problem with prostitution, but in recent weeks gang trouble has surfaced as well, Hartley said at a news conference Friday. He represents the 3rd District, which includes much of the boulevard.

"We have a public outrage at the gang activity that is taking over El Cajon Boulevard," Hartley said. "After being continuously told that crime is going down, we see a recent outbreak of gang intimidation and threats on the boulevard."

Since the incidents came to light a couple of weeks ago, Police Capt. Mike Tyler said, patrols have been beefed up along El Cajon Boulevard, particularly near 45th Street, where gang members have scared the owners and customers at AAMCO Transmission.

"Recently, we've had a few incidents which have prompted the city councilman's concern," Tyler said. But he added that there is considerably more gang activity in Southeast San Diego than in City Heights. Throughout all of San Diego, he said, "Juvenile and youthful gang activity has been increasing over the years."

Debbie Gesshel, who owns the AAMCO facility at 4545 El Cajon Blvd. with her husband, Harry, told reporters yesterday that an occasional broken window and vandalism to the property’s wire fence were about all the problems they had experienced until two weeks ago.

That week, their shop had three gang-related incidents in three days, she said.

"All of a sudden we just started having a lot of problems," Gesshel said. "Three days in a row we had these problems. I was scared and was told to arm myself." The shop is across from Hoover High School.

Bill Elliott, who works with gang members and other youths as a program specialist for the San Diego Urban League, looked into the circumstances surrounding the first incident at the automobile-repair shop. He learned that a 17-year-old boy who is not interested in joining a gang took refuge in the shop’s waiting room with a friend while being pursued by gang members. The gang members were trying to enlist the boy as part of their group, Elliott said.
"We're talking serious peer pressure," Elliott said. "There's a lot of peer pressure for kids to join gangs."

Elliott said the incident did not warrant closing the high school at lunch time, as Hartley had suggested. "Hoover's getting a bad rap for this one isolated incident," Elliott said.

There have been gangs in Mid-City for a while, but the community is not the only part of town to have gangs, Elliott said. "The problem is everywhere," he said. "It's everywhere in San Diego. I feel this is an isolated incident."

Tyler, of the Police Department, said El Cajon Boulevard already gets heavy police coverage because of the prostitutes that hang out there. "To a large extent, El Cajon Boulevard gets a considerable amount of attention by police," he said.

Hartley, who took office in December, campaigned on a get-tough-on-crime platform.

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