

Crime-billboards plan is opposed in City Heights

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For board members of the City Heights Business Improvement Association, the idea was simple: use billboards to draw attention to the area's high crime rate.

In a unique move, the association had planned to put messages on as many as 10 billboards along University Avenue with a brief, startling 12-word message:

"Welcome to City Heights. San Diego's Crime Capital. Won't Anybody Help Us?" The message was followed by a hot-line phone number.

But even before they went up, the billboards did draw attention, as well as criticism, controversy, and hard feelings -- from members of the very community they were meant to help.

Three billboards are scheduled to go up today, at University and 42nd, University and 46th and University and Wilson streets. The association will hold a news conference for the unveiling and will call for several anti-crime measures: foot patrols on University Avenue; funding for street and sidewalk improvements; and a neighborhood storefront police office.

"We've sat in meeting after meeting," said Jim Merriken, president of the association, "and have gotten just so much lip service."

But yesterday afternoon, a group of angry residents and business owners called a news conference of their own to criticize the plan. To them, the message on the billboards does more harm to the area than good. They believe it will further drive away business and that it ignores the efforts of other groups over the past several years to fight crime. It also, they said, would serve as an open invitation to criminals.

"We have a lot of positive things going on here," said Carol Seneff, a resident and member of a community law enforcement task force that works with city agencies, including the police, to combat crime. "And this is going to destroy it."

The uproar apparently had some effect. After a late-afternoon meeting, the association said it would go ahead with the news conference this morning where "an announcement will be made and a statement given," said Bob Battenfield, public relations executive working with the association. Neither he nor other board members contacted would elaborate on what the announcement will be.

The aim of the billboard message was to pressure, even embarrass, city officials into cracking down even more on the crime problems plaguing the area, Merriken said in an

interview yesterday morning. Drug dealing, violent crimes, robberies, gang troubles -- all have conspired to depress and even drive out businesses.

Frustrated at what the association, in a news release, termed lack of an "effective agenda or program to combat crime," the directors hit upon the idea of the billboards to press their campaign, Merriken said.

Capt. Dan Berglund, chief of the Police Department's eastern divisions, also said that he was opposed to the signs, warning that they could irrevocably stigmatize the area. But Berglund also said he understood the frustration of some business owners over the daily barrage of crime. Representatives from the office of Councilman John Hartley, whose district includes portions of City Heights, and from the office of Mayor Susan Golding were also on hand to criticize the move.

Police Department figures show that from January through March, the violent crime rate -- the number of reported crimes per 1,000 people -- was almost twice as high as the citywide average. Last year, the violent crime rate was more than twice as high: 29 per 1,000 residents in City Heights to 13 per 1,000 citywide.

Much of the news conference was actually a discussion among residents opposed to the billboards. Dennis Pressfield, vice president of the association, was on hand to defend the proposed billboards. Most of those present urged the association board to abandon the idea, or use the billboards -- whose space was donated by Gannett advertising -- for a different message: "Criminal Beware! City Heights Cares," followed by the Police Department phone number.

Agreeing that crime was a problem, they disagreed on tactics. Martha Murphy said that the association was out of touch with the community. Pressfield countered, "There are a lot of people who believe in what we're doing."

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