City Heights residents fear crime; Municipal leaders listen to concerns
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One woman worried about the safety of her children after almost witnessing a slaying while walking home.

Another woman talked about living with the constant sound of gunfire throughout the night.

And a man complained about the proliferation of what he considered pornographic posters on University Avenue.

Last night, City Heights residents had the opportunity to tell their problems to two people they thought could help -- Deputy Mayor Toni Atkins and Police Chief William Lansdowne. Both listened and promised action.

"It was very encouraging to our people," said the Rev. Edmundo Zarate, who helped organize the meeting at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Parish on Marlborough Avenue.

The meeting, which drew about 300 people, was in response to residents' concerns about crime in City Heights. This year, three killings and 571 aggravated assaults have occurred, event organizers said.

In Council District 3, which includes City Heights, the number of violent crimes reported dropped 11.8 percent from 2003 to 2004, police statistics show. It was the second-largest drop after District 7, a large area that includes Allied Gardens, the College Area and Tierrasanta. It reported a 22.3 percent drop in that time period.

Although violent crime is down in San Diego, Zarate said, many City Heights residents still live in fear. Most of the residents interviewed by meeting organizers during the last five months said they had been a victim of crime or seen it.

Speaker Alvaro Gonzalez told Atkins and Lansdowne what many residents he surveyed would like to see in their community.

They want more police officers on the streets.

They want safe neighborhoods.

They want a promise that the police will not contact immigration authorities if they report a crime.

Lansdowne and Atkins said they were committed to putting more officers in the area. The police chief said the Mid-City area already has more officers than other areas in San Diego. But, he said, he will add more.
Lansdowne also talked about the police department’s efforts in City Heights to address two major concerns -- school safety and prostitution.

The department, he said, received 54 new motorcycles this week. Motorcycle police should be more visible at the schools in the mornings and afternoons, he said.

By early next year, he said, police will install cameras along El Cajon Boulevard where prostitution regularly occurs.

The police chief also clarified that his department does not contact immigration authorities when someone reports a crime.

Atkins said she will continue to work with city officials, police and residents to improve City Heights. She talked about the start of a new citywide gang commission and pledged to make public safety a priority.

She also promised to get more lights installed in City Heights. Last year, she said, the city spent more than $150,000 on street lights there.

However, she said, resources are more limited now.

"It will not be easy," Atkins told the crowd. "We have a serious budget and financial crisis at the city."

Atkins also pledged to return to City Heights within 60 days to meet with residents. Some did not get the opportunity to ask Atkins and Lansdowne questions during the public comment period because of time constraints.

"My staff will sit until we talk to everyone who comes that day," Atkins said.

Lansdowne said he, too, would return.

"I'll come every month if you bring this size crowd," he said.