City Heights resident Carol Seneff scans the newspaper and grimaces.

There’s another story about a fatal shooting in her neighborhood. More news about businesses leaving the area or faltering.

And then there are all the tales of fear and suspicion that never make headlines, stories the 50-year-old mother of seven hears as they pass from neighbor to neighbor.

How long will City Heights, Seneff's home for more than two decades, take it on the chin with high crime rates and tough business conditions, she wonders.

Seneff and the community group she leads are organizing a novel forum this spring that they hope will set a new course for one of the oldest, most troubled areas in San Diego.

Teachers, judges, cops, ministers and officials from city, state and federal governments have been invited to spend a weekend in City Heights for a crime and economic meeting. Participants are being asked to help devise strategies that will curb crime and boost business in a neighborhood that City Manager Jack McGrory gives "one of the highest priorities in all the city of San Diego."

The April 22-24 event is "a much more grass-roots type of approach than we've ever used in a community," McGrory said.

City Heights residents "have the stake in terms of what happens," he said.

"They need to be an active participant," McGrory said.

The meeting is a kind of sleep-over, with the estimated 50 to 75 participants expected to bunk down each night on cots at Wilson Middle School.

"We wanted them to be in the middle of City Heights ," Seneff said recently, "to hear the (police) helicopter overhead, to hear the gunshots, so people know exactly what we live with."

However, the weekend is not just a showcase of urban ills, organizers said. It's about getting participants to meet local residents and to get both groups thinking about how to improve services in the area.

Up to this point, city services in City Heights have "all been working in our own sphere of influence," said Nancy McPherson, a liaison between the City Manager's Office
and City Heights Partnership, the 4-year-old community group that is organizing the forum. "This is a chance to say, 'How can we work together?'"

Organizers described a heavy schedule of tours, speeches and small discussion groups that will focus on issues that include economics, community development, crime, land use, education, health and social services.

When the flurry of activity wraps up, organizers said, they will follow up immediately by compiling specific recommendations into reports and forwarding them to the City Council.

"We know it took a long time (for the problems) to get to this point, and we know it will not be overnight that things will change," Seneff said. "But this is giving hope to us. We finally have the ear of the city and county and state."

In a neighborhood roughly bounded by Interstate 805, El Cajon Boulevard and Home and Euclid avenues, the residents of City Heights are the threads of a multicolored tapestry. There are more than 60,000 black, white, Asian and Latino residents, and a walk down the street means hearing a mixture of tongues, including Vietnamese, Laotian and Spanish.

City Heights, a sleepy, suburban neighborhood before World War II, experienced a postwar boom as a site for military housing. Beginning in the 1960s, and continuing for about two decades, the area saw moderate commercial development, attended by construction of low- and moderate-income housing.

The 1990s result is congestion that has overwhelmed streets, schools and housing, city officials and residents said.

Slightly more than 12 percent of area residents were unemployed in 1990, according to census figures. In some pockets of the neighborhood, one-third of the residents lived below the poverty level, census figures showed.

While the area saw a dip in crime last year, City Heights has been burdened with one of the highest crime rates in the city, police said. Violent and property crimes climbed steadily between 1989 and 1992, police statistics show.

Some businesses complain that crime has scared away customers. In a recent survey of University Avenue businesses, half the respondents said they would be willing to pay for armed security guards, said Chris Haddock, a consultant with the City Heights Community Development Corp.

There are other business concerns as well. For example, the area lacks adequate parking for customers, said Philip Davis, a University Avenue businessman and the treasurer of the City Heights Business Improvement Association.
Davis said he will attend the April meeting and hopes that it will spur new attention from the city and other business officials.

"There's too many of us here who like City Heights, and we don't want to give it up," Davis said.

While some City Heights residents and business people acknowledge the strikes against the area, they are quick to point out some positive changes in recent years.

For example, police and residents have started specialized patrols for the area. Police established a satellite office near City Heights Community Park. A nonprofit volunteer group, Project CLEAN, paints out graffiti and collects litter.

A landlord training program emphasizes the importance of property maintenance and shows owners how to spot problems early. Special teams of police, Fire Department and code enforcement officials patrol troubled areas of City Heights and work with landlords to improve properties. The city started a facade improvement program for small businesses along thoroughfares such as University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard.

Within the next three years, new elementary and middle schools are to be built in the area.

Still, some people, including City Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, say more needs to be done.

"I believe very strongly that the standard ways of looking at urban problems are not working in City Heights," said Kehoe, whose district includes City Heights and who plans to attend the meeting. "We're not seeing the type of turnaround we'd like to see."

Community members hatched the idea for such a meeting about a year ago. For the City Heights Partnership, the last several months have been filled with telephone calls, mailing invitations and coordinating with city departments such as the City Manager's Office and the Police Department, as well as with such community groups as San Diegans United for Safe Neighborhoods and the Mid-City Redevelopment Corp. Each of those organizations is helping pay the cost of the April meeting, estimated at $11,500, organizers said.

As they complete plans for the meeting, community organizers say they are hopeful that they will come away with more than just dialogue.

"We may not come out with all the answers," said Michael Sprague, chairman of the City Heights Area Planning Committee.

However, Sprague said, "we've got three days to come up with ideas that can lead to working solutions."
Memo: Head varies

Editions Vary
Edition: 7,3,5,6
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-1:7 B-7:3,5,6
Index Terms: BUSINESS ; CITY ; CONFERENCES ; COST ; CRIME ; KILLINGS ; LEADERS ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; ORGANIZATIONS ; POVERTY ; PREVENTION ; SAN DIEGO ; SCHEDULES ; SCHOOLS ; WEAPONS ; STATISTICS
Record Number: UTS1113874

***Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***
Full-text obtained via NewsBank