

# City efforts to cut rowdy behavior around Cal Poly show results

**Cynthia Lambert, The Tribune News, 12-3-15**

Several new efforts are underway in San Luis Obispo to improve the quality of life for permanent residents and their college-age neighbors in residential areas around Cal Poly, and city staff will study more ideas — including party registration and keg registration programs — in the coming months.

It may be too soon to say what effect the new initiatives will have on overall “neighborhood wellness” between Cal Poly students and longtime San Luis Obispo residents, but there are signs that a crackdown on rowdy behavior is having an impact. Amended unruly gathering laws have led to an increase in citations, an alley off Hathway Avenue that was overrun with trash has been cleaned up, and University Police can enforce city code violations up to a mile off campus.

San Luis Obispo police have issued six citations for unruly gatherings since changes went into effect in August — compared with 12 citations issued in the previous five years. Since the fall quarter started, University Police have written 28 citations off campus for violations of city ordinances such as carrying open containers or urinating in public, and 62 citations for public-disorder crimes under various state laws, Chief George Hughes said.

There are also ongoing efforts to reach out to thousands of student-age residents at the start of the school year through “walk and talks,” in which police and code enforcement officers talk to residents and hand out information about city codes for parking, trash and noise.

And the city is working with residents, Cal Poly and Cuesta students and administrators to create an annual communications plan to get consistent messaging out to students.

In addition, a new rental housing inspection program — which aims to address unsafe living conditions — officially started Tuesday. The first phase is an amnesty program to legalize unpermitted work or existing unpermitted dwelling units. Registration of rental units starts Jan. 1.

But a few residents who attended a San Luis Obispo City Council meeting Tuesday said that noise is still a serious problem — not only from parties but also from students meandering streets near campus in search of those parties.

“Daytime and evening noise keeps residents from enjoying their own backyards or having guests over for a barbecue,” said Sandra Rowley, chairperson of Residents for Quality Neighborhoods, which has about 120 members. “Nighttime noise keeps people awake. Yelling or hollering while walking or standing on residential sidewalks is at the very least discourteous.”

I believe one of the biggest issues facing residents is still noise and is one of the most common reasons that residents in those areas move away.

Carolyn Smith, San Luis Obispo resident

Resident Carolyn Smith said noise complaints have increased every year since 2012. City data shows there were 2,584 noise complaints related to parties in 2009 (parties could include any social gatherings in the city, from wedding receptions to birthday parties). That number dropped to 1,644 in 2012 and increased to 1,841 in 2014.

“This needs to be reduced,” Smith said, “if we’re ever going to stop the exodus of residents in these neighborhoods.”

The issue of neighborhood wellness — the city’s term for addressing problems with noise, parking and large parties in areas around Cal Poly — has been a high priority for city officials for many years. The number of noise complaints dropped after amendments were made to the city’s noise ordinance in 2010, Neighborhood Outreach Manager Christine Wallace said.

The changes included reducing the number of allowable warnings to one every nine months and holding residential property owners responsible for repeat noise violations.

“For us to have come down to 1,600 (complaints) and then hovering around 1,750 to 1,800 a year — for me, that shows incredible success,” Wallace said.

The city has worked more closely with Cal Poly, Cuesta College and residents “to make sure we’re getting the message right, and collaborating to get those messages out.”

“Will it ever be 100 percent quiet in San Luis Obispo?” Wallace added. “I don’t know that that’s reasonable ... we don’t have a 100 percent influence on people’s behaviors. It’s always going to be a challenge ... definitely having more campus housing will make an impact.”

The neighborhoods surrounding the university have slowly transformed from homes occupied by owners to more and more student rentals. In San Luis Obispo, 60.7 percent of homes are rentals — well above the statewide average of 44.1 percent, according to the most recent American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Cal Poly has started construction on a new dormitory at Grand Avenue and Slack Street, and has long-term plans to add more housing on campus.

In the spring, the City Council heard recommendations from a “civility working group” of Cal Poly and Cuesta College administrators, city staff, residents and students who brainstormed ways to improve the town-gown relationship.

On Tuesday, the council heard an update on some initiatives the city is pursuing to improve neighborhood wellness and voted unanimously to approve staff’s suggestions for putting several strategies in place.

A few programs will be studied: A staffing assessment of San Luis Obispo police to prepare for growth within the city and at Cal Poly should be presented to the council in March; more information about a keg registration program will come forward in May; and analysis of a party registration program will return next fall.

A few ideas won't be pursued, including a noise ordinance in public spaces on streets and sidewalks for gatherings of 50 or more people. Staff was concerned that doing so could infringe on the public's right to assemble or on free speech rights, according to a staff report by Wallace.

Residents for Quality Neighborhoods requested San Luis Obispo police re-examine this option. The problem, according to a letter from the group, is not that people are assembling, but that disruptive noise happens during late night and early morning hours.

Overall, council members were pleased with the work done to date.

"It feels like a moment of celebration because of the progress made on some of these efforts so far," Councilman Dan Rivoire said.

Councilwoman Carlyn Christianson also commended the successes and noted that neighborhood wellness is an ongoing effort.

"There will be opportunity to add future action items, but first we're going to get through this group," she said.