

Environmental Health Coalition Asks National City, City Council to Protect the Health of Children Attending Kimball Elementary School

A 2006 ordinance gives the council a chance to phase out polluting businesses adjacent to the public school

National City, Calif.—July 24, 2012—At a City Council meeting in National City this evening, Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) asked the governing body to protect the health of children attending Kimball Elementary School by first phasing out adjacent businesses that grossly pollute the community. EHC, an organization that combats environmental health issues in San Diego/Tijuana communities, requested City Council to prioritize these companies on its recently revealed list of businesses that do not conform to approved land uses in Old Town National City. All ranked businesses will need to eventually relocate to appropriately zoned areas.

"More than 400 students attend Kimball Elementary School, which has 37 adjacent businesses emitting dangerous levels of toxic fumes," said EHC Associate Director Georgette Gómez. "It's common sense—this is a high concentration of children exposed to toxic fumes for long periods of time every school day. Why would we wait any longer than necessary to get them clean air?"

Historically, Old Town National City was a residential area, but to facilitate the car industry after World War II, incompatible land-use patterns were permitted and industrial businesses came into the neighborhood. For years, EHC and community residents advocated for a new community plan and zoning in the area because the many auto-related shops and small industries in residential neighborhoods raised high concerns.

But, California considers a non-conforming use "grandfathered in" after a zoning change – that is, they allow it to stay in its current location. To overcome this challenge in 2006, National City adopted an amortization ordinance, which gives the city the right to require a non-conforming business to be phased out after a reasonable amount of time.

In 2010, the city updated the Old Town National City community plan that rezoned the neighborhood back to residential and commercial-compatible designation. This rezoning triggered the implementation of the phase out ordinance.

"I realized the negative impacts caused by the auto body-shops located in the area. I saw fires, breathed toxic odors, and was obligated to walk on the street. I also noted water coming out of the workshops that was mixed with pollution and

ran down the sidewalk," said Gabriela Chavez, a National City resident for 16 years. "Due to all this, my eldest daughter suffered from severe headaches." Chavez's youngest daughter currently attends Kimball. According to zoning data, Old Town National City houses 222 polluters per square mile compared to 44 in National City or 17 in the county. This intermingling of industrial uses with homes, schools and parks pushed National City's asthma rates to one of the highest in San Diego County.

"We want a clean and toxic-free community. In Old Town National City, some people suffer from asthma, bronchitis and allergies. We face health issues—particularly our children," said Margarita Garcia, a senior resident who has lived four blocks from Kimball for 13 years. "I always have allergies because there is a paint and auto-body shop in front of my house."

City Council will accept public comments on the phase out list for 30 days. The city is expected to respond to public comment before the year's end and announce the next steps in the phased approach.

"We thank City Council for hearing our input tonight and allowing time for the community to respond to the phase out list," said Gómez. "Ultimately, this is about bringing relief to Old Town National City residents."

The amortization process has not been used on any property in National City to date.

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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COALITION: Founded in 1980, Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) builds grassroots campaigns to confront the unjust consequences of toxic pollution, discriminatory land use, and unsustainable energy policies. Visit us online at <http://www.environmentalhealth.org/>.