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Residents push for removal of certain businesses; companies question city's methods

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Written by Katherine Poythress

12:01 a.m., Aug. 2, 2012
Updated 4:28 p.m., July 31, 2012

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A healthier Old Town National City

NATIONAL CITY — National City leaders face the challenge of trying to please homeowners and business owners as they work to rid the city's west side of businesses that pose health and safety hazards to their neighbors.

Residents had mixed responses to the city's amortization report, which City Council members reviewed July 24. Most residents urged moving forward with the process of eliminating operations that threaten the neighborhood's safety, but some business owners said the criteria used to rank companies in order of elimination priority were unfair or inaccurate. Meanwhile, the nonprofit Environmental Health Coalition and several parents of Kimball Elementary School students want the city to eliminate polluters near the school immediately.

National City has one of the highest asthma rates in San Diego County, which the coalition attributes to the fact that pollutant-producing industrial businesses are intermingled with homes, schools and parks.

The problem is worst in the western side of the city, known to residents as Old Town, which is home to 222 polluters per square mile compared with the county average of 17 per square mile, the coalition says. The area features a hodgepodge of businesses and homes, many of them right next to each other, thanks to a post-World War II push to industrialize the city even in its residential areas.

Cities in the 1950s were each encouraged to pick a unique industry to emphasize locally as part of an effort to re-brand and stimulate the economy, Mayor Ron Morrison said. As a result, National City provided incentives for auto-related companies to mix among the existing homes on the western side of the city, in hopes that residents would eventually move east.

Many didn't, and in 2004 the city hired a planning consultant to help re-establish Old Town as a safe and healthy neighborhood. That involved adopting new zoning laws.



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Two years later, the City Council passed a law known as an amortization ordinance to provide for the removal of businesses that do not conform with new zoning codes, once each company's investment has been recovered, or amortized. Now the city begins the difficult task of prioritizing which businesses to amortize first, and how.

This latest report features a ranked list of 145 businesses that no longer conform to approved land uses in Old Town National City. They were evaluated based on a set of 26 criteria, ranging from the current assessed value of the land to what kind of security features they incorporate. Other criteria included proximity to a "sensitive area," such as a school or park, and proximity to a residence.

"The plan is to re-establish the west side as a healthy, safe and vibrant neighborhood where people engage in community life," said Planning and Development Director Brad Raulston.

Three parents urged council members to start its amortization process with the 37 businesses adjacent to Kimball Elementary School that they say are emitting toxic fumes.

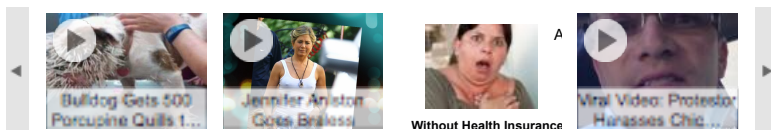
Puppet Safari owner Mary Powell said she feels some of the ranking criteria are unfair. There should be an exception in the neighborhood's new plan for arts-related businesses that can help revitalize the area, she said. She also feels that businesses should be allowed to stay put if they are willing to go green with more environmentally friendly materials and practices.

"My manufacturing business is mis-described in that report that you paid a lot of money for," she added.

Morrison urged all the speakers to put their concerns in writing, detailing any inaccuracies for city staff to review.

The report is available to the public for a 30-day review and comment period ending Aug. 24, after which the planning director will meet with the council to confirm the criteria, establish an amortization period, and in February recommend to the City Council which businesses to begin amortizing first.

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