

# Environmental Health Coalition

COALICION de SALUD AMBIENTAL

401 Mile of Cars Way, Suite 310 ♦ National City, CA 91950 ♦ (619) 474-0220 ♦ FAX: (619) 474-1210  
ehc@environmentalhealth.org ♦ www.environmentalhealth.org

## MEDIA RELEASE

### For Immediate Release

#### Contacts:

Tony LoPresti (English/Spanish)  
(619) 474-0220 ext. 126  
Mobile: (831) 246-3780  
Montserrat Hernández (Spanish)  
(619) 474-0220 ext. 103  
Mobile: (619) 952-3656

### **National City Residents Win City Council Support On Phase-out of Polluters and Core Community Demands Concern about Building Height Limits Remains**

**(October 31, 2007) – National City, CA.** Sixty Old Town National City residents, led by Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), rallied yesterday in support of most of the Westside Specific Plan. Nearly 200 people attended the City Council hearing which followed, demanding the council initiate the phase-out of polluting businesses, a critical element of the plan.

The hearing was the City Council's first opportunity to weigh in on the Westside, or Old Town Specific Plan, the result of over two years of community meetings in which hundreds of residents have participated. The Council did not take official action but rather voiced their perspectives about the proposed plan and gave guidance to staff for proceeding.

EHC's core demands –housing affordable for current residents, phase-out of toxic polluters, establishing buffer zones between freeways and homes and 3-story height limits were largely supported by the Council.

“I hope we come together to move this plan forward. We need to start attacking these gross polluters. We've asked too much of this community already,” said Vice Mayor Frank Parra. Port Commissioner Robert “Dukie” Valderrama, also a longtime National City resident, spoke fervently in favor of implementing the plan to phase out polluters, saying “I was dealing with this problem when it made my son ill in 1988, and here we are today still trying to address this. We need to move forward with the phase-out of polluters now.”

School district representatives also came out in force, including Dennis Doyle, National Schools Superintendent, Alma Graham, District Trustee, and Sonya Ruan, Kimball School Principal. All

*more*

spoke as ‘child advocates’ who have experienced toxic fires and releases from businesses close to Kimball Elementary. Dr. Doyle made the connection to the recent fires in the county, stating “Many of us have experienced not being able to leave our homes due to air contamination. That’s what many children experience in Old Town on a regular basis. We need an uninterrupted learning-safe environment for our youngest residents.”

“As a resident and a teacher, I’ve seen the impacts of poor planning and toxic pollution on our children. We have an opportunity now to create a new future for them,” stated Margaret Godshalk, a lifetime resident of the Old Town neighborhood, a Kimball Elementary School teacher and a member of the EHC Board of Directors.

Approximately 30 community members testifying in favor of EHC saw their persistence paying off as they won council support for the rapid phase-out of toxic pollutants, affordable housing, a 500-foot buffer zone between Interstate 5 and residential areas along the western edge of the Westside Specific Plan, and height limits in most of the area.

Many developers were calling for additional unrestricted height allowances throughout the neighborhood in order to maximize profits, though this was rejected by the council. The residents, who are demanding that height limits remain at two and three stories throughout the plan, are concerned about the council’s direction to study additional height limits along Civic Center Boulevard and on the blocks across from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Street trolley station and the Public Works Yard. Developers also called for the plan to be delayed and re-designed, which was rejected when the Mayor and Councilmembers gave direction to move the plan forward into environmental review.

Decades of bad planning have created an unhealthy mix of residents next to schools and polluting businesses in Old Town. Over 100 Old Town businesses, including autobody and paint shops, welding shops, and truck driving schools, have contributed to elevated risks of asthma and other illnesses.

“I have spent too many nights in the emergency room with my five-year-old daughter who is severely asthmatic. The council needs to take quick action to phase out pollutants,” said Adriana Calderon, a community leader with EHC. Calderon’s daughter Zoe is a student at Kimball School.

In addition to suffering increased health risks, the neighborhood is the site of frequent fires and accidents, many involving chemicals and other hazardous materials. National City School and Fire officials, including Chief Rod Juniel, are among those who support phasing out polluting businesses.

The City Council of National City has taken several steps in recent years towards cleaning up the Old Town neighborhood. In August 2006, an “amortization” ordinance was passed unanimously which allows councilmembers to phase out the worst polluters in the neighborhood. And, earlier this year, councilmembers responded to residents’ demands that the Momax truck driving school cease driving practice between a school and an apartment building.

The Specific Plan would completely re-zone the neighborhood and call for the amortization of autobody and paint shops, which are responsible for about 70% of the carcinogenic and toxic chemicals released into the air each year in the community, according to EHC. In a 2005 EHC

survey, 97% of community members in the Old Town neighborhood supported the removal of polluters from the neighborhood.

EHC and the community are advocating for toxic polluting businesses to be replaced by affordable housing and community-serving businesses. According to income and housing statistics for the city, 90% of residents need affordable housing in Old Town, the poorest neighborhood of the poorest city in San Diego County.