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Citizens, Officials Try to Find Common Ground

St. Basil's gathering attracts 250

By Richard Freedman | Vallejo Times Herald | January 22, 2020



A packed St. Basil's gymnasium of about 250 people expressed their issues of concern in the community to various city and county officials Tuesday night. (Richard Freedman—Times-Herald)

It wasn't a phone call left for a city or county official that may or may not be returned. Or a call to police dispatch that said there are 15 calls for service already on hold.

Tuesday night's gathering at St. Basil's gymnasium gave the community — at least 250 individuals, anyway — a chance to voice their concerns face-to-face with the Vallejo City Council, Solano County Supervisors, and law enforcement.

The first-time event, coordinated by the seven-year nonprofit **Common Ground** went well, with topics including homelessness, rising rents, and school safety.

“We were thrilled with the success of the evening,” said Common Ground member Cheryl Gewing.

“I think it was impactful to hear people’s personal stories and troubles they’re facing and trying to understand the process available to them,” said Councilmember Pippin Dew.

“I liked the sharing of the stories ... that the community is involved and wants to work with us,” added Councilmember Rozzana Verder-Aliga.

Mayor Bob Sampayan said city officials were already aware of most of the issues presented, but it was positive to sit at a table “and hear the personalized stories.”

“I think it was awesome to have such a wide representation of people of the faith community, schools system, law enforcement, city and county leaders,” added Solano County Supervisor Erin Hannigan, calling the event “anything but warm and fuzzy. It was the cold, hard truth about what’s happening in the community.”

Co-host Tazamisha Alexander said the packed room was indicative that the community and officials are willing to work together.

“I’m so happy we have a lot of people here to participate. It’s really awesome,” Alexander said. “I wanted to see a large turnout from the community to let our leaders know that people care and have concerns. People are talking and trying to figure out solutions together.”

The time-structured event — even Bishop Jaime Soto of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento was told “you have five minutes” — included individuals taking the stage to tell a personal story followed by an official committing to meeting with Common Ground to hopefully attack the issue of concern.

Sanii Nelson spoke of her daughter on the “autism spectrum” and how police need to be trained in mental health issues.

Vallejo Police Chief Shawny Williams replied that his “chief priority is to provide mental health services” and that he would like to establish a “mobile mental health response team.”

One resident told of her rent increase of \$1,000 a month for a mostly-senior apartment complex and how “it was a nightmare for us. We were so stressed.”

Sampayan said he met and “listened to eight ladies talking to me in tears that broke my heart” and that he was proud to lobby for the passage of Assembly Bill 1482 that limits rent increases, adding that he was “all but threatened that my tenure as mayor was going to be short” by an apartment complex ownership.

Another citizen speaking at the microphone, Cristina Ramirez, explained in Spanish how her rent goes up but she’s afraid to complain about mold, for fear her rent would increase even more.



Vallejo City Councilmember Hakeem Brown listens to a citizen’s concerns Tuesday night at St. Basil’s gym. (Rich Freedman—Times-Herald)

“I’m here because I want better treatment for other families who are in our situation,” Ramirez said.

Mike Gaul, a lifetime Vallejoan at 70, said after the 6:30 to 8 p.m program that he had zero personal issues, but was concerned about seniors with dementia like a next door neighbor who “just fell through the cracks and didn’t have anybody she could turn to.”

Vallejo City Councilmember Hakeem Brown listens to a citizen’s concerns Tuesday night at St. Basil’s gym. (Rich Freedman–Times-Herald)

The event itself “was great,” Gaul said. “It was very interesting with a lot of sad stories, but there’s a commitment from people who can make a change.”

“Hopefully, people will be heard,” community activist Barbara Gaea said, hoping the “sheer force of numbers and all these organizations that have lots of numbers behind them forces them (officials) to listen.”

After the handful of individual stories and replies from officials, Alexander beckoned the room to sit at the appropriate table assigned at check-in. Most of the 25 tables of eight had at least one city or county official participating.

Sampayan, Verder-Aliga, Dew, Katy Miessner, Hakeem Brown, and Hermie Sunga represented the Vallejo City Council. Hannigan was joined by fellow county supervisor Monica Brown and supervisor candidates Rochelle Sherlock and K. Patrice Williams. David Isom, district 5 school board trustee, also spoke.

“It was a wonderful event,” Miessner said, happy that “lots of cities and the county were represented.”

“With the strength of all these organizations, the really challenging problems are much easier solved,” added Miessner.

In addition to the chief, Vallejo officers participating included Capt. Lee Horton, Capt. Joe Iocona, Lt. Jason Potts, Sgt. Jeff Tai, and police assistant Tina

Encarnacion.

“It was good for me to hear all the concerns,” Horton said. “It was good to have a seat at the table.”

Getting a commitment to meet and “work with us on our goals and the great, positive feelings of our members in sharing our stories together” were definite highlights of the evening, Gewing said Wednesday morning.

“We got many commitment cards returned with members who want to help in the next year, and work with us to reach our goals on homelessness, rental issues, school safety, and police and community relations,” Gewing said.



Councilmember Hermie Sunga, far left, and community members discuss various topics of concern at the Common Ground-sponsored gathering at St. Basil’s. (Richard Freedman–Times-Herald)