



YOUR BEST SOURCE OF LOCAL INFORMATION FOR
Marina del Rey • Playa del Rey • Del Rey
Venice • Santa Monica • Westchester
Playa Vista • Mar Vista
PUBLISHED EVERY THURSDAY

Thursday, March 6, 2008 Last modified: Thursday, March 6, 2008 10:07 AM PST
Town hall meeting looks for ways to help the homeless

BY VINCE ECHAVARIA

Taking on a problem that stretches far beyond the boundaries of Venice, leaders in the community are working on identifying ways to address homelessness, starting at the local level.

The Venice Neighborhood Council sponsored a town hall meeting Tuesday, February 26th, to initiate discussions on how the council and other leaders can help better the homelessness situation in the community.

Looking to identify common perceptions about homelessness and gather feedback in a constructive manner, the Neighborhood Council brought together a variety of groups involved in the issue, including residents, service providers, property owners and homeless individuals.

"We wanted to talk about the issues head-on and initiate a dialogue where the people involved can identify what they agree on," Neighborhood Council outreach officer Marc Saltzberg said of the town hall.

Neighborhood Council members called on representatives of the City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission to facilitate small group discussions between those in attendance about the impacts of homelessness and how the community can work on improving the problem.

While Venice has one of the largest concentrations of homeless people in Los Angeles, Neighborhood Council president Mike Newhouse noted that the issue is not limited to Venice.

"It's not just a Venice problem," Newhouse said.

Neighborhood Council members recognize that homelessness is "about people," and they are encouraging the community to offer recommendations on potential solutions at both a local level and regional level, Newhouse stressed.

Council members said they were pleased at the participation and the suggestions that resulted from the town hall meeting, which included that a task force be formed to review the comments and report to the Neighborhood Council next month.

"It absolutely worked on the level we wanted it to work on," Saltzberg said of the meeting.

Human Relations Commission representatives also praised the town hall event for bringing the various groups together to discuss homelessness and credited the Venice Neighborhood Council for taking the lead among the city's Neighborhood Councils to organize such a meeting.

"We're glad that Venice is where this starts," Bobbi McDaniel of the Human Relations Commission told the town hall audience.

Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl pointed out that homelessness was one of the three main issues he encouraged the Venice Neighborhood Council to focus on when he took office, as the issue is one of the most challenging that the community faces.

The councilman noted that officials continue to seek facilities in the local area to provide services to the homeless population, and mentioned the social service agency Upward Bound House's recent acquisition of a motel in Culver City for an emergency shelter.

Discussion groups at the town hall addressed the impacts of homelessness, saying they are concerned for the well-being of the homeless and would like to help but aren't sure how. Some groups credited existing community organizations such as the Venice Family Clinic and St. Joseph Center for providing services, but added that more housing facilities are needed.

When exploring potential solutions to homelessness, people need to recognize that it's a "community-wide issue," said Rabbi Allen Freehling, executive director of the city Human Relations Commission. Communities also need to understand that relocating the homeless away from the neighborhood does not solve the problem, Freehling said.

Following the group discussions at the town hall, the Neighborhood Council called for a task force to evaluate the input and prepare a report for the board in April.

Steve Clare, executive director of the Venice Community Housing Corporation, who will head the task force, said the group — which includes a cross-section of the community — hopes to study the issue in a constructive way and prepare a series of recommendations that are "practical."

"I expect for us to be able to work together to do serious evaluations and come up with constructive proposals for the Neighborhood Council to consider," Clare said.