

Teens in lurch after latchkey program closes

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would've felt better if they (Rec and Park) would've talked to me."

The \$300 fee for this year was dropped after protests from a coalition of neighborhood groups led by SOMCAN. But since the Playaz's eviction, the campaign to get Rec and Park engaged with the community hasn't succeeded.

SOMCAN, western SoMa's nonprofit community action organization, sent a three-page letter on Oct. 2 to Mayor Newsom decrying the changes. It demanded access at Gene Friend for kids 17 and under; adequate park staffing; maintenance of restrooms; monthly meetings at Bessie Carmichael with the community; and a Rec and Park outreach process.

The letter listed 15 organizations in support and copied the supes, the San Francisco Youth Commission, and DCYF Director Maria Su, among others. And it asked for a meeting with Rec and Park. Mai Doan, SOMCAN youth organizer, says Newsom never answered the letter.

The coalition went to the Youth Commission Oct. 5 and got a supporting resolution that was also sent to the mayor, the supes and Rec and Park demanding "urgent action" in addressing the SoMa community's concerns. The resolution cited the latchkey program's cost to "largely immigrant, low-income neighbors" and the "antidemocratic and effectively discriminatory changes." Youth Commission President Nicholas Quesada seemed mystified by the \$600 charge. "Maybe the city doesn't want people to come to the park," he said in an interview, "and maybe it's trying to change the demographic."

'NO RESPONSE TO OUR DEMANDS'

Rec and Park General Manager Phil Ginsburg and Area Supervisor Steve Cismowski were at two commission hearings, Doan said, "to address the public, but with little information, acknowledgement of our concerns, or clarity." As a result of the Youth Commission resolution there was a meeting with Cismowski, she said, after "much resistance and rescheduling." But the months dragged by with "no follow-up with a promised town hall meeting

and no response to our demands."

To publicize the neighborhood discontent right after United Playaz's eviction, the group had held a colorful demonstration Nov. 2 outside of Gene Friend called Dia de los Muertos: Death of a Community Space. Corpuz led a sign-carrying group of 60 headed by a score of little kids down the sidewalk to the front door.

The group chanted slogans and a half-dozen speakers from various groups, including two senior organizations, railed against the changes. With few backyards, one speaker said, residents need a free, safe community space. Gene Friend is the only covered public recreation center in SoMa. The open Victoria Manalo Draves park is a half-block away on Folsom Street.

"Stand up, man," Corpuz yelled. "It's time to fight."

Little kids clustered around and joined the antiphonal chants: "Pay a fee? No, keep it free. Whose community? Our community. Hell no, we won't go."

YMCA PROGRAM BOOMING

At the time, the new latchkey program inside had two children in it. By February more had come for the offering of sports, games, arts, crafts and a snack. "We have eight signed up and five regulars," Melvina Hill, who runs the program with David Hong, told The Extra in February. "But the YMCA afterschool program at Bessie Carmichael," she said, is "kind of hurting us." From 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. Gene Friend is closed to anyone age 13 and over, unless it's an adult accompanying a youngster.

The YMCA program in the Bessie Carmichael cafeteria is free and has 120 kids and a wait list.

But the Playaz's eviction ends a controversial era at Gene Friend that was fraught with security issues that culminated with a shooting three years ago.

United Playaz landed on its feet, though. It was given an activities room at Bessie Carmichael for a couple of weeks until Corpuz could find his own center, which he did. He landed a Mayor's Office of Community Investment grant to lease a two-story building at 1038 Howard St. "It's a safe place for youth and we have 40 to 50 here," he says. "They come from all over the city." It is free for youth 5 to 17 and goes 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. It has a study hall, life skills training, job placement, case management,

counseling on teenage pregnancy, tattoo removal referral and other programs.

Rec and Park held a public budget meeting at Gene Friend Jan. 26 that was attended by about 50 people, including neighbors, community organization representatives and many from the Rec staff, including Ginsburg and Cismowski. The department faces a \$12.4 million shortfall in 2010-11 and hopes that with the fee increases and new revenue-raising ideas it was asking the audience to suggest it can forgo cutting programs and jobs.

When the latchkey issue came up during public commentary, Ginsburg said that Gene Friend was one of 16 parks that would have such a program in the fall and if anyone had trouble paying, Rec and Park had a scholarship program. And to his knowledge, he said, nobody had ever been turned away from a program for lack of funds. The Extra asked what plan, if any, the department had for teenagers turned away in the fall. He deferred the question to Cismowski, who said the department wanted to add teen programming, but they "wouldn't be five days a week."

Corpuz was in the audience and spoke up. "Afternoons are the highest crime time for over-12 kids," he said. "And the neighborhood has 1,800 youngsters between 12 and 24." But he quoted no source.

SOMA UNITED'S TOWN HALL

After the meeting, The Extra asked Cismowski why United Playaz was evicted. He said the members hadn't completed the volunteer process, which among other things requires fingerprints. Days later, Corpuz told The Extra Playaz had done everything required to work with children, including fingerprinting, and he had signed a memorandum of understanding with Rec and Park.

SOMCAN youth led a town hall Meeting Feb. 5 at Bayanihan Community Center focused on the Gene Friend center. Attending were about 50 resident youths, adults including Corpuz, other Playaz members, and mothers with kids who took advantage of volunteer child care. The neighborhood organizations present called themselves SoMa United. There were no city representatives. Hot pre-meeting dinner food and pizza were offered free from the adjacent kitchen.

"We want to hear the pros and cons, get opinions and hear what they say about the latchkey program," said Jennifer Modesto, 15, a John O'Connell High School freshman and one of several teenage leaders under Doan's supervision.

Neighbors spoke of their hopes and dreams for programming, their fears, and how often they used the park.

"I don't use it because of the violence," said one woman.

"I've been scared to play basketball because of the shooting," said a young man.

Fear of homeless people wandering in and the need for security was a common refrain. But most people said they used the park at some time and wished it was open more.

At the end of the hour, the leaders summarized what people wanted and expected from the park: a variety of age-appropriate programs, summer and after-school programs, a park open to everyone all day and on weekends, security, gang-prevention and other classes, job fairs, Girl Scout meetings, basketball and other athletic programs.

Doan distributed surveys as people folded their chairs and gathered their children.

"We need to know who is here for demographics but these can be anonymous," she announced "These will shape our campaign to go to City Hall."

The teenagers helped tidy up. ■



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Kids and adults donned macabre masks for their "Dia de los Muertos: Death of a Community space" protest over a lost latchkey program at Gene Friend Rec Center in November.

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WHAT: Join us in celebration of our journey down Golden Gate Avenue at our Ribbon Cutting ceremony.

WHEN: March 13th, 2010 from 2 PM-4 PM. Ribbon Cutting will be at 3 PM.

WHERE: Shih Yu-Lang Central YMCA interim facility at 387 Golden Gate Ave.

RSVPs are mandatory. For more information, or to RSVP, email us at SYLC.YMCA@gmail.com.

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