



[Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [News](#) | [Find Jobs](#) | [Events](#) | [Voices](#) | [Discussions](#) | [Features & Profiles](#) |

## Safe Streets: Safe Homes Community Meeting

[Main Site](#) : [Inside EPA.net](#) : [Community Voices](#) : [Community Reports](#) : Safe Streets: Safe Homes Community Meeting

---

### *Safe Streets: Safe Homes Community Meeting*

News@EPA.NET

06/04/2004

## Safe Streets: Safe Homes Community Meeting

**City officials meet with residents about public safety and safe, affordable housing**

**By Dennis J. Parker, Community Advocate**

On May 19th, 2004, more than 120 citizens packed the St. Francis of Assisi Church meeting room to discuss Safe Streets and Safe Homes. The community forum was sponsored by Peninsula Interfaith Action (PIA) and the One East Palo Alto (OEPA) Neighborhood Improvement Initiative (NII). Representing the City of East Palo Alto were Mayor Donna Rutherford, City Manager Alvin James, Police Chief Wesley Bowling, and Police Lt. Rahn Sibley.

The meeting was organized around a "platform," an agreement of mutual understanding between the residents of East Palo Alto and the City of East Palo Alto for the physical and emotional safety of the community. PIA and OEPA have formed the Safe Streets: Safe Homes Coalition to work as a responsible partner with the City of EPA as each partner fulfills

its responsibilities to the community. The Coalition believes that all families should be treated with dignity, and only by working with residents can problems be solved. Many residents are fearful of approaching the City, and that fear stands in the way of physical and emotional comfort.

The Safe Homes component of the platform focused almost exclusively on the garage conversion issue (officially known as "second units").

The platform asks the City of East Palo Alto to agree to help residents living with possible safety violations to remedy the situation without having to move out. Keeping families together and preserving affordable housing should be a high priority.

Here are other key points in the agreement of mutual understanding:

- \* Notify a PIA/OEPA Safe Streets: Safe Homes Coalition Representative if any resident is removed from his/her home due to a life-threatening safety violation.
- \* Document cases of residents living in conditions that could put their lives at risk so that the Coalition can provide assistance to the residents, and also build awareness among community members who may be living with similar situations in their homes.
- \* Work with community agencies and the Coalition to find a temporary safe place for the residents(s) to live when necessary.

Mayor Rutherford replied that she could only respond after consulting with the entire City Council. The issue would have to be put on the agenda for a regular City Council meeting. The earliest available date is June 15th.

The meeting was led by Co-Chairs Maria Ambriz and Alvin Spencer, with Mary Frances Johnson translating, and Bobbie Spencer keeping time. During the Safe Homes presentation, residents came forward to tell stories of not being able to get clear information about what they had to do to bring their units into compliance. (The testimony reinforced the remarks heard at recent City Council meetings during Community Forum.) Residents were charged permit fees that appear to be inconsistent and unreasonably high (in one case, \$22 thousand for permits to repair and add on to a house). In many cases, residents felt terrorized by aggressive inspectors and code enforcement officials. One citizen has been meeting unsuccessfully for more than a year to get clear information. (Note that the situation

has greatly improved in the last few months, now that municipal codes and fire regulations are available on the web sites of the City of EPA and the Menlo Park Fire Protection District.)

City Manager Alvin James spoke of two possible short-term solutions. Since the City is not staffed to give seminars, they are studying an Oakland model whereby outside contractors assist citizens in understanding building codes and regulations on a one-to-one basis. Mr. James also introduced Chris Gayle, the new City Building Official, who can enable the Public Works Department to be more responsive to citizen inquiries.

The death of two children in a Christmas Eve fire was a wake-up call for the City. Official files show a long list of building code and fire safety violation cases. The City is investigating 38 cases classified as "unsafe" due to problems such as un-vented heaters and uncovered electrical outlets. They are down to the last seven cases, and have not had to displace anyone. After that, it is up to the City Council to decide what to do with the remaining cases involving second units.

The Safe Streets portion of the program resembled the community meeting on crime that took place in the very same room on November 25th 2003, in response to a rash of shootings. One citizen observed that the Police Department receives half of the City budget, yet there is little community policing. (Note: The fact that the Police Department operates 24x7 partially explains the high expense.)

Stewart Hyland gave a report on what OEPA was doing in its OEPA Safe program. Up to eight block clubs have been formed, and more than 40 residents have met with Lt. Sibley. The goal is problem solving, rather than being incident-driven. Chief Bowling agreed to have Police officers attend block club meetings at least three times a year if they are not on service calls. There are two school resource officers, and there will be more officers on the street after school. The Police Department will liaison with the County Drug Task Force, and will share what is public record. But jails are overcrowded, creating a revolving door of people being incarcerated then released. The Police are committed to 100 percent participation in community policing.

There are 36 officers on the force, including four staff. There are four officers per shift on the beat. They must go to Redwood City to make an arrest; then they must make a report. East Palo Alto is not getting as much support from the County as it had in the past. The cost of County services has increased by 40 percent. The Sheriff's Department used to provide assistance for free. During the September to January uptake in shootings, East Palo Alto

was billed \$64,000.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The Safe Streets/Safe Homes Platform is on the agenda as a written communication for the June 15th City Council meeting. Deputy City Clerk Minette Warren described the process that takes place as follows.*

*The item was placed on the agenda by the Deputy City Clerk per directions from Mayor and staff. During the meeting, as the Mayor goes through the agenda process, she will inform Council and public that the item is on the agenda in the Written Communications section. She will then ask if Council wishes to either discuss options for bringing it back as a future council meeting item or what is the pleasure of Council regarding correspondence. Council either agrees to have it come back as an agendized item with directions to staff as to how they wish it brought back and at what possible meeting date, or they can take no action on said item.*

*For more details on the Safe Streets: Safe Homes Platform, see this earlier EPA.net [story](#).*

Contributed by [Content Manager](#)

Approved by: *Content Manager*

- What do you think ? [Add a comment](#)

---

[EPA.net Administrator](#)

[Feedback](#)

[Technical Problems](#)

Copyright © 2002-2005 by EPA.net. All rights reserved. [Terms of Use](#)

**Notice: we collect some personal information on this site.**

**To learn more about how we use your information,  
see our [Privacy and Security Policy](#), and [Our Acceptable Use Policies](#).**

This information was made possible in part by a grant from the Technology Opportunities Program, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.