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In the next few weeks some changes will be taking place in Santa Barbara's Westside.

You might notice that it's becoming cleaner, or better lit. It might become a safer place to walk or hang out in. Neighbors will be talking with neighbors. Residents and local police will be in close communication.

That's the scenario that a large group of Westside residents, local public officials and law enforcement are trying to create as they got together at the neighborhood Boys and Girls Club Saturday afternoon to figure out how they could put together a more vibrant and cohesive Westside community.



Jarrod Schwartz speaks Saturday at the Westside community summit held at the Boys & Girls Club.  
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS

It was an afternoon of presentations that have come out of weeks of deliberation and discussions by several groups.

"It's a very diverse community but it's a very divided community" said Jarrod Schwartz, of JUST Communities, the nonprofit organization that is serving as the facilitator for Westside THRIVE, a community-based program that tries to assist residents in improving their communities.

The program is based on the Harlem Children's Zone, an effort that concentrated on the well-being and development of some of the poorest inner-city kids in New York. The idea was brought to the Westside by local educators in 2010 and has included the opinion from a wide ranging and diverse cross-section of the community.

Santa Barbara's Westside neighborhood is a large, mostly suburban swath of Santa Barbara located mostly between Highway 101 and the Mesa, containing some of the oldest neighborhoods in Santa Barbara.

While it doesn't have the kind of problems that inner city neighborhoods face, said Sgt. Riley Harwood of the Santa Barbara Police Department, there are concerns residents face that diminish quality of life, like the speeders through Westside neighborhoods, kids getting bullied, problems with homelessness.

"I can assure you that we do the best we can with regard to what we think are the priorities but in reality that might not be what truly is a priority for the community," he told the News-Press, commenting on the need for regular contact between the public and law enforcement.

Cultural, socio-economic and language barriers also still exist between residents who have been living next to each other for years.

"We need to know what to do," said one spokeswoman heading up a group of Spanish-speaking residents. "We need to learn the system."

Fears of discrimination and detention, coupled with the inability to communicate effectively, have kept many of the Spanish-speaking community members from opening up to law enforcement.

Meanwhile, the Police Department has recently lost a number of beat coordinators who normally would maintain ties within the community, according to Police Chief Cam Sanchez.

"Starting around Jan. 28, we're going to have four, and that's going to help us attend a lot more meetings and really dialogue more into them, and that's the best thing that we can do," he said

Other issues brought up at the Westside summit dealt with neighborhood revitalization, services for women and children, and the notion of building community hubs

"I think there's a lack of resources on the Westside and a lack of awareness of the resources that already exist," said 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal, who lives in the neighborhood.

Part of the task is to get an inventory of existing services, make them more accessible, and make better use of what he calls the "three pillars of the community": Harding School, La Cumbre Junior High, and the Boys & Girls Club.

Saturday's meeting in some cases set things in motion for concrete action and was meant to keep the momentum going for long-term projects.

For Santa Barbara Mayor Helene Schneider, the meeting was a good refresher on the issues facing her own neighborhood.

"I'm not surprised to hear the comments," she said. "But what's important here is to bring in people who normally have not been part of the conversation before. ... Our challenge is to communicate back and create a system that works for them. We have our work cut out for us."