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City, residents at odds over strategic plan



BY ALEJANDRA MOLINA / STAFF WRITER

Published: March 13, 2014 Updated: 4:15 p.m.



COURTESY HAIRO CORTES

Santa Ana residents involved with community groups calling for immigrant rights and responsible development say city officials need to pay more attention to residents' wishes in drafting a five-year strategic plan to guide the community.

The five-year strategic plan – a process aimed at defining community priorities – is mandated by the city's Sunshine Ordinance, adopted in 2012 by the City Council as a way of increasing openness at City Hall.

Input from residents and organizations was weaved into the plan, which was posted on the city's website earlier this year for residents to read. Funding for the plan is expected to be approved in April, following City Council adoption this month.

Although numerous community meetings were held to gauge residents' needs during the process, members working with the Santa Ana Collaborative for Responsible Development (SACReD) and Santa Ana Building Healthy Communities say the draft plan does not specifically mention a handful of points they have proposed.

City leaders, for their part, say the process has generated much support and input from the community; nine outreach events attracting more than 2,100 participants were held

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and more than 1,300 comments were recorded.

One major point that the groups are vying for is for the city to add language to the plan on how it will complete a review of operations at the city jail – which houses inmates under contracts with the U.S. Marshals Service and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement – and take appropriate action once the review is completed.

"We just really want to make sure that in the strategic plan there's a commitment to do the right thing for the immigrant community of Santa Ana," said Daisy Gonzalez, a community outreach coordinator with the Kennedy Commission, which works with community groups to implement the Santa Ana Building Healthy Communities Initiative.

To that end, City Manager David Cavazos said the city is "looking at the city's jail operations to ensure that any decisions made will create a sound fiscal framework for a sustainable future."

SACReD members also want the strategic plan to provide language for landlord accountability, funding for restorative justice programs, and standards that require businesses receiving subsidies to hire local workers.

During the public comment portion of the March 4 City Council meeting, residents representing community groups held signs in Spanish and English that read, "Are you listening? Your future depends on our presence."

Some spoke of police harassment in the city's immigrant community; others talked about a lack of "dignified housing" for "very low-income" residents; many spoke against the city's ICE contract.

Council members were visibly taken aback by the comments, saying the City Council has been a proponent of affordable housing and supportive of resolutions for immigrant rights. In recent months, the council has prided itself on being inclusive in drafting the strategic plan.

"To hear people make those types of comments was really tough for me to swallow because it's not true...if that was the case, you would never have the Sunshine Ordinance," said Mayor Pro Tem Sal Tinajero during the meeting.

"It's OK to demonstrate your wishes, but not in a way that's making it seem like the council does not have a heart to continue to move forward," he added.

The City Council is to review the strategic plan March 18.

It can be adjusted periodically based on the current needs of the community, said Cavazos.

Information: santa-ana.org/strategic-planning

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