

MINUTES

Juvenile Crime, Graffiti and Gang Violence Task Force Meeting

Monday, August 11, 2008

5:30 p.m. at Loaves & Fishes Board Room

514 S. "E" Street

Harlingen, TX

Members Present:

Danny Castillo, Dean Hall, Ernesto Carballo, Gabriel Gonzalez, Gerald Gathright, Jim Solis, Larry Galbreath, Lori Weaver and Tom Hushen

Guests Present:

Judge Menton Murray, Tommy Ramirez and Rene Garza

The task force convened at 5:30 p.m. with the members stating their names and titles.

George McShan passed out copies of the agenda for the previous meeting held on July 17, 2008 outlining the charge of the task force. He was pleased that the Valley Morning Star has given the task force positive media attention. He passed out an agenda for today's meeting. He asked Gabriel Gonzalez for a report on the minutes of the last meeting.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that he took 5 pages of hand written notes at the last meeting. They had before them an overview of the meeting which included no action items. He advised next time the minutes would be distributed to the task force in advance of the meeting so they would have time to review them. He asked them to review the minutes and make any revisions.

Gerald Gathright stated that on the last page, it should read Jose Luis Cavazos instead of Jane Cavazos.

George McShan asked if there were any corrections or additions to the minutes? He mentioned that they had discussed a time line or calendar. He recalled that by the first week in December they wanted to complete the work of the task force. He asked for affirmation on that and asked Gerald Gathright and Chief Castillo if that was what they recalled?

The members present agreed that was correct.

George McShan asked for that to be so noted in the minutes. He stated that this was a collaborative effort and they wanted to make the process as transparent as possible. He mentioned that all members had an equal share in participation and encouraged them to voice their ideas at any time. He mentioned that Judge Menton Murray was present at the meeting. They welcomed his input because he has oversight of the juvenile justice system and is very much involved.

Larry Galbreath asked on the status of a form that city staff was preparing in order to get citizen input.

George McShan stated that lead them to the next item on the agenda. They moved to review of the juvenile justice questionnaire.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that he and Chief Castillo went thru a series of different formats to try obtain some of the information. He advised that the simplest questionnaire would be to have a yes or no question and in some cases ask for their opinion. Initially, half the form would have required a written response. After discussing the options and how the ranges would be so great, they decided to limit it to just the ones they were presenting. They also combined some of the questions and provided rank order for feedback. They also decided that the form needed to be in Spanish. He thanked Ernesto Carballo for providing the Spanish version on the back-side.

Chief Castillo stated that they would be having the National Night Out event on the 19th being held at Fair Park. He advised that that would be a great venue to incorporate the questionnaire. He asked the committee to review the form and provide them with feedback.

Judge Menton Murray stated that he wasn't sure what speeding had to do with a lot of this. Considering what they were there for. There may be a lot of people that think speeding is a problem, but he wasn't sure they were addressing that problem.

A member stated that he would change two things. He stated that maybe a lot of them didn't know what the SAVE program was, so he would spell that out. He thought # 11 was similar to # 9 where you rank 1-5.

Chief Castillo stated that they forgot to put the ranking in # 11.

Ernesto Carballo stated that cruising would be more appropriate as opposed to speeding.

Gerald Gathright stated that wasn't a crime.

Tom Hushen stated that it got the point where they were going to do a cruising ordinance for the City because it 'gets pretty bad on Friday nights...with kids racing and cruising.'

Chief Castillo stated perhaps they should add cruising and drag racing in the form.

Gabriel Gonzalez asked if under other, they should substitute anything else in it's place?

Gabriel Gonzalez asked if they should put in shootings?

Chief Castillo stated that 'gang violence' should be the general catch all.

Gabriel Gonzalez mentioned that the National League of Cities was putting out a questionnaire asking if cities have an assault weapons problem. He felt they didn't have an issue what that and perhaps they should take it out altogether.

George McShan asked about assaults. He felt that was on the increase.

Tom Hushen mentioned maybe it could be listed as fighting.

George McShan mentioned that it was tied to 'bullying' in high school.

Chief Castillo stated they could give examples in parenthesis.

Gerald Gathright mentioned they could list assaults and then in parenthesis list bullying and fighting.

George McShan stated that made sense.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that so far they had taken out traffic and added cruising or racing and under other added assault and in parenthesis listed bullying or fighting.

Dean Hall mentioned that 'really you can put 'one on one' violence'.

George McShan stated sometimes it was more than one.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated they were changing # 11 to have them ranked.

Chief Castillo asked the committee what they understood as far as 'gang violence'?

A member stated he saw that as gang on gang violence, such as fights and initiations.

Chief Castillo agreed it should read 'gang related' violence.

Larry Galbreath stated that it seemed that more and more people from outside Harlingen were coming in and doing the violence. He asked how they should address that activity?

At this point, Jim Solis entered the meeting. George McShan acknowledged Jim Solis as his co-chairman for this task force.

Gabriel Gonzalez asked about the other questions. He proceeded to ask the committee about each question listed on the form.

Question # 1: The committee agreed it was needed.

Question # 2: The committed agreed it was needed.

Jim Solis asked if there would be an effort on that particular day (when the questionnaire was distributed) to reach out not just to adults but also to young folks?

Gabriel Gonzalez responded that the idea was not to just use this form on that one day. He mentioned perhaps they could use the form at a series of meetings such as PTA's to fill them out. He stated that they didn't have a lot of time if they wanted to finish by December.

A member stated that he wanted to see the high school students fill out the form. He mentioned they would get a real reading of what was going on.

Chief Castillo mentioned that maybe they could still leave the anonymous factor on the form but have them fill in their age.

George McShan stated that perhaps they should identify if they were a parent or other. This would help the committee know if the perception of whether they had a gang problem was different based on age. He stated that maybe it was a deterrent but maybe the options could be, if they were a parent, student or business person.

The committee agreed that was a good idea.

Gerald Gathright stated that it might be good to list the general area of town that they lived at, such as east, west, north or south.

Rene Garza stated that was a good idea and could go along with # 4. He mentioned that # 8 was also along that idea. He suggested that perhaps they reword # 4 to a two part question.

Ernesto Carballo mentioned that they discussed at the last meeting that they could identify two or three zipcodes with a higher volume of violence to focus on.

Tom Hushen stated that he thought the way they were going to address it was that this form would just be general at National Night Out. Then when they started to have the neighborhood meetings, then they would know those were from that section and they could group them in that way. He felt that if they started to list neighborhoods then people may not participate.

George McShan stated that was true. He mentioned that when they started to have Town Hall meetings then people would come from that certain area and have that stack of forms labeled as east or south side, etc. He thought people might be hesitant at being identified.

Larry Galbreath stated that someone stopped him the other day and was concerned at being identified. This individual told him that some gang members had extensions cords plugged into his electricity running to their house and they had told him that if he messed with it, then the gang members would burn his house down.

George McShan asked them to go back to # 4 and if they listed a neighborhood then the people might not fill out the form.

Gabriel Gonzalez mentioned that if they asked for a location then they might not fill out the form.

Tom Hushen stated that right now they just wanted a general idea. He felt they would have a good mix at National Night Out. He felt that with # 8, they would get a good idea of where they lived, if the person affirmed their neighborhood had been a victim of gang violence.

Gabriel Gonzalez asked if that would satisfy the committee's request for a two-part question?

George McShan stated that probably would because they wanted to get as much input that they could from everybody.

Jim Solis stated that they did want to get the young person's perspective versus the older persons.

The committee commented the form could probably be distributed when school started up again.

George McShan thought they could get a good random sample from the school system.

Gabriel Gonzalez recapped that # 1 – 4 and # 8 were allright as listed. He asked about # 5?

Tom Hushen stated that was important.

Chief Castillo felt it was important that they have a format that could be filled out quickly. He stated that especially at events such as National Night Out with officers helping them fill out the form. He asked if they wanted to leave open-ended questions such as those?

George McShan mentioned that there will always be people with opinions and he felt for those individuals it was appropriate.

Chief Castillo stated they had initially put in the 'other' in # 11 to have them express any other ideas.

A member stated that if it were a 'fix it question' then it would have to be under # 9. He liked the idea of having them say any profound statement they wanted to.

Lori Weaver stated that you may get some ideas from that.

Gabriel Gonzalez recapped that # 5 was allright. He asked about # 6 and 7? He mentioned that someone suggested they spell out SAVE and asked if they need to explain what that was?

Tom Hushen mentioned it stood for Students Against Violence Education.

The committee agreed they should list 'bring back violence education at the schools'.

Gerald Gathright suggested they provide some type of in-school education.

Tom Hushen suggested the wording, 'more after school programs/in-school programs for violence education.'

Gabriel Gonzalez recapped if they wanted him to strike out SAVE program and make it 'more after school programs/in-school programs.'

The committee agreed that was correct.

George McShan stated that was correct because there were other programs such as DARE and they didn't want to give preference to any one program.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that would leave them space to add any other questions.

Gerald Gathright suggested community policing.

Gabriel Gonzalez mentioned there would be the place to add that. He asked if the committee agreed on that addition?

The committee agreed that was correct.

Tom Hushen stated they had a form of community policing.

Jim Solis asked for those particular neighborhoods that had already been identified as high risk if there was a more concerted effort to bring the community together to resolve some of this?

Tom Hushen stated that was the goal of this committee. They wanted bring the neighborhoods together and play a role in solving this problem. The first step is to get this out at National Night Out and after that they wanted to set up meeting in neighborhoods for community meetings.

Jim Solis asked if that would be the neighborhood watch program?

Chief Castillo confirmed that was so. He mentioned that National Night Out was an event that is coming up very soon with media coverage. He advised that they have 19 or 20 neighborhood watch groups that were established which would be the next level.

Tommy Ramirez stated he took the liberty of filling out the form to see how he would feel about it. His # 1 ranking was mostly police officers. He made a note next to it to be assigned to do community/neighborhood policing and building neighborhood programs. He felt that that was the root of the problem. He said 'you can work with the kid all day long, but until you go in there and start fixing the family, you're just sending the kid back to the same problem'. He mentioned that they were going to have the same 5% that have a continuous cycle of disfunction that usually breeds most of the crime. He felt those were the areas that needed to be handled and focused on. They send kids to Judge Murray for placement and these kids spend 6 or 9 months a year or sometimes 2 years, and then they come back really doing well with a better attitude. But they go back to the same disfunction and sometimes they can resist and sometimes they fall back to the same thing.

Tom Hushen stated they used to do that when they had the DARE and SAVE programs. He mentioned that the school had counselors that would go to the homes afterschool and talk to them. He feels that more officers would help tremendously.

Ernesto Carballo stated that what City of Miami was doing was that they went into three communities and revamped storefronts and they had their storefront offices right there and they turned those neighborhoods around in a matter of 2 or 3 years. They were perfect examples of what community policing is all about. In these instances, the police cars would be parked out front and gang members won't necessarily hang out where the police are present.

Tom Hushen stated that was what they did with the firehouse projects. These firehouses were closer to the neighborhoods and they were able to put an officer in the firehouses getting more access to the communities. He said the firehouse police worked really well but when you don't have the manpower to put a policeman in that firehouse for 8 hours a day, then it doesn't work.

Ernesto Carballo asked how the La Placita substation was working out?

Chief Castillo responded it was open and officers do some work out of there but it is not what you would perceive as being manned constantly. The officers are out very sparsely. He has two community resource officers that are responsible for keeping the 19 plus neighborhood watch groups viable. He felt that was a huge task in itself. These officers spend very little time behind a desk.

Tommy Ramirez asked if the City rented that spot?

Chief Castillo responded that it was an agreement with the property owner where they pay the property tax only. There is no monthly rent fee that is paid. The owner upkeeps the building and they only pay the property taxes. He felt the committee's strategy of getting the officer's presence in the neighborhood was a good idea. He commented that having static locations might be on the way out given the fact that now they have mobile reporting. He stated that he visited that issue a few years back and funding held them back on getting a mobile command center. His idea was that wherever you have a problem, then you move into that neighborhood. His initial intent was that a mobile command center could serve a multitude of purposes. Obviously when you have a major incident you have a command center. Also, if you have a neighborhood with a rise in gang issues or whatever may be. He's seen what other cities have done as far as parking in front of those locations and live out of the mobile command center. In essence the police department operations have been moved to that location for that area of town. This has been very effective for other cities because you have a mobile ability to set up in an area but you are able to pack up and move to wherever the problem is instead of trying to invest in a static hard location.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that San Antonio has two of those units that they are using.

Tom Hushen stated that McAllen also has that type of unit.

Ernesto Carballo asked if they considered the possibility of cameras?

Tom Hushen stated that cameras really don't eliminate crime because it gives the person the mindset that he's safe because there's a camera around and then there's a liability for whoever owns the camera. He felt that camera's were good for evidencery purposes but unless you had someone watching it 24/7 that can respond to it they really didn't prevent crime. He commented that going back to community policing they used to have mopeds and go to a neighborhood and park it there and meet all the people in that neighborhood. This worked really well when they had problems in Parkwood, they sent that scooters there and got rid of that problem.

Chief Castillo stated that they have about eight bikes that are outfitted but they don't have the manpower to assign them to anyone.

Dean Hall stated maybe they were getting a little bit ahead of themselves as he was listening to solutions versus trying to find out what the problem was.

George McShan commented that was # 6 on the agenda dealing with strategies to address juvenile crime—which would be a continuous issue. He asked the committee to go back to the questionnaire to see what they reached as a consensus. The committee recapped the following:

Question # 1: Stays as is

Question # 2: Stays as is. George McShan asked if that was correct?

Gabriel Gonzalez responded that was correct.

Question # 3: Stays as is

Question # 4: Stays as is

Question # 5: George McShan stated that they had some discussion and decided to keep that one.

Questions # 6 – 8: Stays as is.

Question # 9: George McShan asked what changes they had agreed to?

Larry Galbreath stated that they got rid of the SAVE program and added after-school program wording.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that they mentioned something about community policing. He asked if that should be a separate issue with multiple choice?

Tommy Ramirez mentioned they could word it as 'assign police officers to do community/neighborhood policing programs'.

Gabriel Gonzalez asked if the committee was in agreement with that wording?

Tom Hushen mentioned that ‘more police officers/neighborhood patrols’.

Gabriel Gonzalez asked if they would understand what community policing was? He stated maybe they should put ‘neighborhood patrols/policing’.

George McShan mentioned in his opinion when a person notices a police officer in their neighborhood then it was different from the other police officers. As a citizen you’d know that this officer in the neighborhood was a friendly person in the neighborhood.

Gabriel Gonzalez recapped the wording as ‘neighborhood police officers’.

George McShan stated they had a large parental involvement programs. He mentioned they might want to look at having someone with expertise in this field to do the neighborhood policing. He thought maybe they could offer some additional resources for the police department to acquire this person.

Judge Murray asked what ‘graffiti implement laws’ were?

Chief Castillo stated that they have a graffiti implement ordinance that makes it stricter on the types of pens, markers and etching devices that if someone is caught near a graffiti area they can be held accountable.

Judge Murray then understood the term as listed.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that even though it was listed as ‘graffiti ordinance’ maybe they should reword that to ‘graffiti tools’?

The committee concurred to the wording of ‘stricter graffiti ordinance’.

Larry Galbreath stated that parents should be held accountable.

Judge Murray asked what ‘issue citations to parents if commit two instead of three’ meant?

Chief Castillo stated it was part of the curfew ordinance that parents can be ticketed. He stated that the municipal court judge could assign the parents to attend at least 50% of the community service that was ordered.

Rene Garza stated that he had discussed this with the police officers when they were writing this up. He asked them if it wasn’t better to issue the citation and let the judge have the discretion whether to fine them. Then they would be held accountable right ‘off the bat’. He thought they might have problems if they (police officers) have to decide ‘do I give this person, one, two or three citations’. He felt that the judge should handle that end of the process.

Chief Castillo mentioned that was exactly what they were trying to do. He stated that with the current ordinance they are given 'three strikes' before they end up going to see Judge Murray. He advised that it was at the fourth violation that they charged them on the penal code violation.

Rene Garza mentioned that the parent needs to know right away that they'll be held accountable and let the judge have the discretion.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that they would have to change the ordinance for that to 'zero tolerance'.

Rene Garza stated that it didn't have to be 'zero tolerance' it could be 'discretionary'.

Tom Hushen mentioned that it should be 'zero tolerance' and then the judge knows he has the discretion to either community service or other.

Rene Garza mentioned that the discussion he had with the officers was that the officers would be saying to themselves 'I don't remember if I gave this person one or two, etc.'

Jim Solis commented that Judge David Wise has a really good turrancy program in which he brings all the parents and kids in and they have to listen to speakers. He commented that Judge Murray does a wondering thing in which he makes the people who want to witness the process wait to the very last and that's a learning experience.

Rene Garza commented that # 10 answers itself. The answer in his opinion as a property owner is 'no'. But if they were to ask him if they should allocate more funding towards it, he may say 'yes', but if they were asking for a tax increase, the answer would be 'no'.

George McShan stated that the public wants to be safe as the bigger picture and they would support the police department. He commented that they wouldn't support a social type program but rather if they can see that this is something that can make them feel safer, then they might say 'yes'. He stated that as Jim Solis was commenting that if it was targeted for additional police enforcement that might work.

Judge Murray commented that 'additional funds were needed to reduce juvenile crime for use of the taxes'.

The committee agreed that was appropriate wording.

Larry Galbreath stated that funds were very tight right now as they were going thru collective bargaining at this time.

Tommy Ramirez asked if there were any federal grants they could apply for or drug seizure funds?

Chief Castillo commented that this past year they allocated a little over a million dollars for the new computer system and that came from drug seizure funds. He commented that they do a lot of funding for these extra things thru those funds.

George McShan asked how # 10 would read?

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that 'additional funds would be needed to prevent juvenile crime'.

Tom Hushen commented that back on # 9, where the parents were to be held more accountable. He asked if that should be taken out because they were already doing a stricter curfew and graffiti ordinance.

Tommy Ramirez asked if they could just say 'hold parents more accountable'?

The committee agreed that was a good idea.

Lori Weaver stated that if her children were to 'embarrass' her enough to where she had to go out and do community service, remove graffiti or pick up trash, then that would make an impression on the parents.

Gabriel Gonzalez stated that took care of # 9, 10 and 11.

Judge Murray asked about # 12?

George McShan asked what age ranges should be listed?

Gabriel Gonzalez stated there was the 18 and under and asked the committee how the next ranges should be listed?

Tommy Ramirez mentioned it could be 18 and under, 19-39 and 40 and above.

Larry Galbreath asked what the officers would say in response to citizen asking 'what exactly are you (city) going to do with this tax increase?'

Tom Hushen commented that it went back to # 9.

George McShan stated that # 10 was sort of a strategy to help them solve the problem that exists. That questions appears to be disconnected from the others.

Ernesto Carballo mentioned that everything they suggested would cost money, that 'nothing' would be free.

Tom Hushen commented that would be the burden of the Commission. This committee would be making their report to the Commission and the Commission would make the decision to raise the taxes or not.

Rene Garza commented that the question could read 'if additional funds were needed would you support allocating more of the city's budget towards fighting juvenile crime'.

The committee agreed that was appropriate wording.

Larry Galbreath suggested it include 'working for federal grants specifically for the juvenile crime problem'.

Tommy Ramirez stated that he liked what Renee Garza was saying as 'would you support the allocation of more community funds to reduce gang violence/juvenile crime'.

George McShan stated that was a strategy to remedy whatever the issues were brought up from the forms. He felt it didn't go along with the data, it appeared to be disconnected from the data they were gathering.

Larry Galbreath stated that this committee was charged with trying to find ways to take care of this problem and then the implementation of that would be brought to the Commission. He thought maybe they should have a list of issues they can compile and then make a recommendation to the Commission.

Judge Murray asked that assuming whatever answers they got from the questionnaire, what would that tell them? It might tell them, that there is a substantial amount of people that would support more taxes or vice versa. He asked what the point was about putting that question in there at this time?

George McShan commented that if they put that in there right now, it might raise some concern that 'you'all (city) want more money'. He stated that this would come up at a certain phase. Once this phase came up then they would address it. He asked for a consensus from the committee on that point.

The committee agreed that it should be left out and they could come back to it later.

Gerald Gathright stated that everything in # 9, there wasn't a thing in there that didn't cost a lot of money. So, they probably shouldn't ask them anything that was going to cost money. He suggested they drop that one too.

George McShan recapped the age ranges as 18 and under, 19-39, 40-55 and 55 and older.

The committee agreed those ranges were correct.

George McShan asked if there was any other information they wanted to add to the form?

Tom Hushen suggested they put the City logo on the form.

George McShan reconfirmed the National Night Out on the 19th from 6-10 p.m. at Fair Park. He moved to strategies to address juvenile crime and graffiti. He mentioned that they talked about the Town Hall meetings and how they wanted to have those in the different parts of town. He recommended they look at what locations those could be held.

Tom Hushen commented that the first one should probably be at Bowie Elementary.

Gerald Gathright commented that every school early in the year had the most people at the first PTA meetings. He suggested they use the PTA's.

Tom Hushen asked if one or two representatives from this committee along with an officer could go to PTA meetings and give a presentation on their purpose.

Larry Galbreath commented that was a good idea.

Gerald Gathright stated that the new superintendent would have to approve the involvement.

George McShan commented that was a very good idea.

Gerald Gathright mentioned they could obtain a list of the meetings that start in early September.

Tom Hushen asked if they could have the list by their next meeting.

George McShan asked the committee to decide on their next meeting date. He suggested the first week of September.

The committee decided September 2nd was a good meeting date.

Tom Hushen commented that hopefully by that date, they would have the list of PTA meetings and what could be presented at these meetings.

George McShan stated that they would also have Town Hall meetings for the different areas. They should decide where to start having those meetings.

Gabriel Gonzalez confirmed their next meeting would be on September 2, 2008 at 5:30 p.m. at the Loaves & Fishes office.

George McShan thanked everyone for their attendance and asked the committee to keep in touch with Gabe Gonzalez's office.

With no further business to discuss, the meeting concluded at 6:45 p.m.