

Neighborhood rises up against parole-office plan



PHOTO: PIA TORELLI

Hundreds gathered Saturday to vehemently oppose a state plan to open a new parole office in a part of the Bayview District, saying the location is in the middle of an improving residential area.

Residents of developing pocket of Bayview cite public-safety fears

By Johnny Brannon
STAFF WRITER

Mary Yuan is all too familiar with the devastating impact of violent crime — and with the fear it leaves behind to breed.

Yuan was mugged several years ago near her home on the cusp of the Bayview and Portola neighborhoods, and the beating she took left her blind in one eye.

That painful experience prompted Yuan to take to the streets Saturday morning to protest a plan to set up a new parole office in the neighborhood.

"After many years of problems, the neighborhood is getting better," said

Yuan. "We don't want things to get bad again."

The California Department of Corrections hopes to set up the parole office at 1970 Carroll Avenue, between Newhall and Phelps streets. Convicted felons would visit the facility immediately after their release from state prison and at other times during their parole terms.

The building is currently owned and occupied by the Just Desserts bakery.

Amid a steady drizzle, hundreds of local residents gathered across the street from the building Saturday and angrily denounced the plan. Many were Asian immigrants who said they'd worked long and hard to

buy homes in the area.

"We believe this will jeopardize our safety and our quality of life," said Yan Mai, who lives nearby. "If our children play outside, will they be kidnapped or sexually assaulted? If you were a mother, what would you think?"

But state officials maintain that visiting convicts would not necessarily commit crimes in the neighborhood.

"I can tell you from my experience that it would be the opposite," said Jim Henson, a deputy regional parole administrator. "In most of the areas we inhabit, the crime rate goes down."

That's because the parole agents who work out of such facilities are

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armed peace officers, he said.

"If there are any problems in the community, they have the ability to respond as a police officer would," said Henson.

And convicts are usually on their best behavior when they visit parole offices, he said, because parole agents can ask judges to send the cons straight back to prison if they cause problems.

"If we didn't supervise these individuals, they'd run amok in the community," said Henson. "What this does is give us a way to supervise parolees in the community."

He said the proposed office would supervise about 1,200 parolees, and that only 5 to 10 would visit the facility each weekday during business hours.

Weren't notified, locals say

Sufay Tam doesn't buy it.

"We are really worried about this," she said. "Every day a lot of kids are waiting at the bus stop just around the corner, and [parolees] will have to walk right by there."

Many neighbors said they first learned of the plans through media reports and were angry that state officials had not made their intentions clear from the start. The *Independent* first reported the plan on April 4, and since then it has been discussed extensively in Chinese-language radio broadcasts.

collected more than 7,000 petition signatures to underscore their concerns.

As of April 5, a total of 3,595 parolees had been assigned to San Francisco's parole agents, according to the Department of Corrections. Of those, 1,062 have already been sent back to prison or are in jail, awaiting a decision on whether they will be sent back.

Correctional officials cannot account for 705 San Francisco parolees who are considered "at large" after absconding from local parole agents, according to a state report. Those parolees are subject to immediate arrest.

But local law-enforcement officials say there's no evidence that parolees are likely to commit crimes near parole offices.

"We certainly hear the concerns of the neighborhood, and we want to keep the neighborhood as safe as we can no matter what goes in that building," said Captain Ron Roth of Bayview Police Station. "But quite frankly, the city needs

to make sure its parolees are taken care of."

The police station and the neighborhood's major grocery store are just around the corner from the proposed parole office site.

San Francisco's parole office is currently located at 112 12th street, at the edge of the Mission District. Police say it's unclear whether that location contributes to neighborhood problems.

"I can't say that's true as a matter of fact, but as a citizen I would be concerned with any type of parole office going into a neighborhood I lived in," said Office Jim Deignan, a Police Department spokesman. "But it's got to be somewhere."

The proposed office would replace a facility that was located downtown until the city used its power of eminent domain to seize the land for the expansion of the Moscone Convention Center, said Henson. The 12th Street office would remain open as well, he said.

Public meeting set

Supervisor Leland Yee, who attended Saturday's protest, said he adamantly opposed the state's plan for Carroll Avenue.

"The Department of Corrections should have been more forthright about its plans for that area," he said. "If they had been more upfront they could have tried to reach a compromise, but it has gotten to the point where people don't believe anything the Department of Corrections says."

Supervisor Tom Ammiano has called for a public hearing on the matter, but Supervisor Mabel

Teng, who chairs the board's Housing and Social Policy Committee, has yet to schedule a hearing date.

Yesterday, Teng introduced a resolution in opposition to the Carroll Avenue site, and seven other supervisors co-sponsored her measure.

Mayor Willie Brown's press secretary, Kandace Bender, said Brown had not publicly taken a position on the issue, but that his staff was attempting to provide local residents with as much information as possible about the plan.

Ultimately, the state Depart-

ment of Corrections has the authority to decide the matter, said Henson.

"The city can't dictate the location," he said. "But we try to be as sensitive as we can to community concerns."

State parole officials are scheduled to make a presentation about the plan and answer residents' questions at a community meeting on May 4, at the Southeast Community Facility, 1800 Oakdale Avenue.

there.

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Flyers posted in the neighborhood warn that "there will be approximately 10,000 convicted felons using this office. It will directly affect the safety of the entire Bayview District."

Henson insisted it wasn't true and said state officials had not tried to "sneak" the facility into the neighborhood, as residents charge.

The Department of Corrections notified the city's Board of Supervisors of the plan in late March. Henson said it was up to city officials to tell residents about it if they believed it necessary.

He said about half the parolees released to San Francisco would be required to stop by the new office immediately to be photographed, interviewed, and drug-tested. After that, parole agents would usually meet with the felons where they live, he said.

"The whole point is to see the individual in their living environment to make sure they are not reoffending," said Henson. "Many of the parolees live in that area, so it would be best to serve them."

Increase in crime feared

A Department of Corrections report shows that in 1998, more than 70 percent of the state's 122,981 parolees were sent back to prison for committing new crimes or for violating the terms of their release.

Robert Chan believes that proves the neighbors' concerns are justified.

"We aren't stupid," said Chan, president of the homeowners' association for the 237-unit Portola Place complex, about half a block away. "Not all of our community may know how to speak English, understand the process, or be articulate, but we know we are being screwed. The southeast quadrant of the city is always being dumped on, and it's got to stop."

Chan said local residents had