

Tracy Press

February 23, 2011

Rep. Jerry McNerney got a firsthand tour of Tracy's gang hotspots this morning, Feb. 23, following a conference with city leaders and police about local gang violence.

McNerney, D-Pleasanton, was invited to a conference with Tracy Police Department Chief Janet Thiessen, City Manager Leon Churchill and Councilmen Steve Abercrombie and Bob Rickman, along with several members of the police force. Abercrombie helped set up the meeting as a response to community concerns about gang violence, which spiked in December and January.

The meeting included a presentation about how Tracy tracks and analyzes crimes and incidents involving gang members, as well as what the city's doing to stamp out gang violence before it gains a bigger foothold.

McNerney said it was a chance to keep in touch with Tracy, and find out what he can do to bring more resources to the city.

"I want to offer whatever assistance I can from the federal level," he said. "I'm really here to learn ... It's a really good opportunity to open up a line of communication."

On the tour, McNerney — along with Miller, Thiessen and Councilman Mike Maciel — saw several pockets in the city associated with a Norteño presence, including sections of the Southside, areas of the Palm Circle neighborhood, and stretches off Holly Drive. The Sureños, Miller explained, haven't really set up a territory yet in Tracy.

Maciel commented during the drive that there aren't any "bad" areas in Tracy, though there are small pockets where gang activity tends to center. Thiessen agreed.

"I think that's one of the challenges, is we have these little pockets," she said.

Even in places gang members are known to hang out, Miller explained, the physical layout of certain neighborhoods can keep police from fighting gangs effectively. Alleys behind houses and blind turns, like in the Palm Circle neighborhood, and deep lots with secluded areas set far back from the street, like in some places around the northern stretches of Holly Drive, put cops at a disadvantage.

And Miller stressed that violence associated with gang members doesn't necessarily stay in those areas.

Before taking McNerney around town, Miller traced serious waves of violence in late 2009 and late 2010 — which he said included Molotov cocktails thrown at houses, stabbings, shootings and murders — to a March 1, 2008, incident in which Sureño gang members tagged the handball court at MacDonald Park, a known Norteño hangout in Southside Tracy.

That, Miller said, "started a war."

In response to the first wave, Lt. Greg Farmanian said police dedicated shifts of one two-officer team to focus around the clock on gang suppression. But Farmanian said that approach "wasn't really sustainable," and when gang activity lulled, the department focused on other priorities.

But with another flare-up at the end of 2010, he said the department decided to focus on a more ongoing effort, including greater communication with other law enforcement agencies, working closer with the probation office and making sure one two-officer team dedicated to the gang detail is always on patrol between 2 p.m. and 4 a.m., when gang activity peaks.

Thiessen said police have identified hot spots and times for gang activity thanks in large part to Janice Cree, a crime analyst who started work with the city more than a year ago. Cree said that her area of expertise — finding patterns in crime and gang activity so that street cops can be more proactive than reactive — is where McNerney might really be able to help the city.

McNerney plans to introduce next week the National Safe Streets Gang Crime Prevention Act, which would direct \$10 million to establish a countrywide database that local law enforcement could tap into, making it easier to track gang members and what they're up to. He hopes the measure will get bipartisan support, as lawmakers of both parties have an interest in keeping the communities they represent safe.

Thiessen said that could be a big help, since the city is always looking for new resources.

After the tour and presentation, the congressman said he'd do what he could.

In the past, McNerney has earmarked federal money for crime efforts in 11th District cities.

From 2008 to 2010, he requested a total exceeding \$1.6 million for Stockton anti-crime efforts, in addition to \$950,000 for cameras to monitor "high-traffic areas" in Tracy. Those requests, according to communications director Sarah Hersh, were made based on what those communities told the congressman they needed, which explains why some cities received money and others didn't.

But McNerney and Hersh agreed it will be more difficult to bring federal money to help Tracy and other 11th District municipalities since the Republican Party gained a majority in the House of Representatives in the fall 2010 election.

McNerney said that, since the GOP has insisted on a crackdown on earmarks — often called "pork-barrel projects" by political opponents — he must instead focus on assisting cities identify federal-agency grants that could help, and follow up by putting pressure on those agencies to approve the grants.

“I think (cutting off earmarks) is a big mistake,” McNerney said. “I’m disappointed I won’t be able to do that anymore.”

Read more: [Tracy Press - Congressman talks crime prevention](#)