

Groups meet in Selma to help stop teen drinking

By Ira Sather-Olson

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In light of statistics which indicate underage drinking is an increasing problem in Fresno County, a handful of regional and local organizations are teaming together to help reverse the trend.

And they're looking at recruiting local youth to help with the effort.

On Feb. 5, officials with the nonprofit Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission, Selma city administrative and police departments, as well as a handful of other regional groups met at the Selma Library in order to hash out plans for the Rural Youth Prevention Project.

Once up and running, the project will feature youth-based councils in Selma, Kingsburg, Parlier and Coalinga that aim to create solutions and strategies to the problem of underage drinking.

During the Feb. 5 meeting, Rob Martin, a program coordinator with the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission, explained to those in attendance the purposes of the project.

He said the main idea was to bring together youth twice-a-month in order to discuss the problem of underage drinking, as well as to brainstorm ideas for projects and community events that address the issue.

The activities that the youth group creates could range from sober youth dances, to specific policy changes, said Martin.

A handout given at the discussion included statistics which indicate a trend of underage drinking in Fresno County.

For instance, recent responses from youth on Fresno County's Healthy Kids Survey show a spike in teen alcohol use. According to the 2000-2001 survey, 32 percent of those in grades seven through 12 self-reported drinking alcohol. In the same survey, dated from 2004 to 2006, 52 percent of teens in those grades reported drinking alcohol.

Tom Whiteside, Selma's police chief, attended the Feb. 5 meeting and said the issue isn't just confined to the county.

"Historically, we've recognized underage drinking as a problem," he said.

Later in the discussion, Selma Police Lt. Myron Dyck spoke and said there are two big problems the PD faces in regards to underage drinking.

The first is that some Selma youth know of certain locations in the city where they can easily obtain alcohol. The second problem is that some parents in Selma allow their children to drink under their supervision, Dyck said.

Still, both Dyck and Chief Whiteside said the PD and city have taken efforts to combat these problems. These include aggressive monitoring efforts of establishments that sell alcohol, as well as the recent

passing of a social host ordinance, which targets adults who host teen alcohol parties.

Nonetheless, those gathered at the meeting will soon become what's called a community support network for the Selma youth council.

Martin explained that the support network will assist the council with resources, technical support, as well as act as a sounding board for youth ideas on community events and policy changes.

Funding for any activities undertaken by both the adult and youth groups will be paid for by a contract the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission received from Fresno County's department of behavioral health, Martin said.

However, Martin also told those at the meeting that this funding runs out in December. At that point, he said, he'd like for the community itself to sustain the program.

Still, the program is in its infancy and local teens for the youth council have only met once.

Pam Long, who works with the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission and will give direction to the youth group, said the community support network as well as the youth council are open to any teens and citizens who are interested.

The next meeting for the community support network is noon March 5 in the conference room at the Selma Library, 2200 Selma St.

Details: Pam Long, 392-4567.