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## Recovery center worries residents near school

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BY BRYCE ALDERTON

February 4, 2016, 4:21 p.m.

Residents of the Top of the World neighborhood told Laguna Beach officials Tuesday night that they are concerned about a substance-abuse recovery center in the area and the possibility of others moving into the city.

Pillars Recovery operates in the area, which is also home to Top of the World Elementary School.

The principal, Mike Conlon, called the community meeting in the school's multipurpose room to discuss an issue that is of concern in many Orange County communities. Attending the meeting were Laguna police, planners, the deputy city attorney and a representative from the office of State Sen. John Moorlach's (R-Costa Mesa). Moorlach's district includes Laguna Beach.

Residents urged the city to take an active role in promoting legislation that would give it some authority over recovery centers and sober-living facilities.

State-licensed recovery and care facilities differ from sober-living homes in that the former provide supervision, care and treatment and, per state law, must have no more than six residents. City staff must treat these kinds of facilities as single-family homes.

Sober-living homes don't require care and supervision, and there are no limits on residency.

Laguna has 13 state-licensed recovery centers, with two trying to obtain approval, Laguna's Assistant Community Development Director Ann Larson said. Larson said she did not know the specific number of sober-living homes, since the operators don't have to file paperwork with the city or state.

"The only time we find out [about a sober-living house] is when someone calls," Larson told those at the meeting.

Los Angeles Times

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In a circulated letter, parents claimed that recovery center patients have harassed and stalked young girls, littered streets with cigarette butts and created parking problems. One man said he found a package containing methadone on his doorstep.

The comments echoed concerns raised last year about short-term renters, those renting a house or portion of a home for less than 30 days at a time. Complaints were that certain renters were wreaking havoc.

Christine Fugate, a mother of two, said Laguna has become "the riviera rehab" and worried about recovery center operators moving into properties once they go on the market, like the house for rent next to her home.

"I don't want this to happen and happen," Fugate said, adding that "no one here is against treatment for alcohol or drug addiction."

Pillars Recovery operates the Top of the World property, a recovery center, and has another location in Corona del Mar. Staff conducts thorough psychiatric screenings of prospective patients, and once admitted, residents attend group therapy sessions, operators say.

"No clients go outside without supervision," Pillars clinician Linda Friedman told the gathering. "I'm a parent like you guys. I'm trying to help people. I don't want pedophiles in here."

Parents, and Conlon, said rehabilitation centers should not be located too close to schools.

"It's definitely a concern," said the principal, who said no crimes have been linked to the Pillars facility. "If I had my way, I would not want it as close as it is" to the school.

Monarch Shores operates a property on Skyline Drive. No representative of the company attended the meeting.

One resident asked Friedman if she would accept a registered sex offender into a treatment program if she knew of the person's background.

"No, that is not someone I would accept," Friedman said. "If I feel someone can't get the best care, I recommend treatment in another facility,"

No state law requires operators of licensed treatment facilities to deny services to registered sex offenders, Carol Sloan, California Department of Health Care Services spokeswoman, wrote in an email.

Laguna police logged calls beginning in October, when Pillars opened the Top of the World facility, and compared the number with the same period from October 2014 through January 2015. Police received 26 more calls from Oct. 1, 2015, through Jan. 29, 2016, than the earlier period. Abandoned cars, at 12, accounted for the largest year-over-year increase among categories that included trespassing, theft and burglary.

"I understand the frustration you have," Laguna Beach police Det. Cornelius Ashton said. "With that, these facilities are operating all over the county. The city is working hard to regulate places and find ways to make you feel safer."

Costa Mesa approved a pair of ordinances that requires group and sober-living homes to be at least 650 feet from one another and obtain special city permits. One of those laws has been legally challenged, putting enforcement on hold.

David Mansdoerfer, Moorlach's district director, urged residents to write or call explaining their concerns as senators craft bills for future legislative sessions.

Ajit Thind, Laguna's deputy city attorney, said the city is "investigating all possible actions" and indicated a willingness to push for greater local control of group homes.

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