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Metro

Loitering or waiting for work?



A sign at the Yum Yum Donut Shop warns men waiting for work that the parking lot is for customers only.

Pat Tehan/The Register

Merchants call crowds bad for business

As many as 100 men, teen-age boys gather daily in Orange to await job offers

By Anita Snow
The Register

ORANGE — The young woman stiffened and stared straight ahead as she marched her two toddlers through the crowd of men outside the doughnut shop.

"Hurry up, kids," she said. "Hurry up!"

Outside, about 50 men milled about in small groups, joking and waiting for someone to drive by and offer them jobs.

"It's like this every day," said

Yum Donut Shop at Chapman Avenue and Hewes Street, where sometimes as many as 100 men and teen-aged boys gather from 6 to 9 a.m. to await job offers.

"Sometimes they are lined up all around the store and customers can't get inside," Lee said. "It's really a problem."

"They're really not troublemakers, but they're hurting our business," Steve Jezek, owner of the neighboring Mobil gasoline station, said. "I feel sorry for these guys. I know they need a

ers away, especially the ladies."

In recent weeks, local officials and community group members have met to discuss complaints from local business owners and consider other sites for the men to gather.

"Of course if the Simpson-Mazzoli bill passes, they may not have to worry about it anymore," said Jose Vargas, Hispanic affairs officer for the Santa Ana Police Department.

"The employers may not be coming around anymore," he

Orange government officials and community members to discuss the situation.

The Simpson-Mazzoli bill is comprehensive federal immigration legislation that would penalize employers who hire undocumented workers. It has been approved by the Senate and amendments are being debated in the House of Representatives this week.

As of Monday, no alternative worker-gathering site had been chosen, said Jean Forbath, chair

CROWD: New sites considered

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woman of the Orange County Human Relations Commission. The commission advises the county Board of Supervisors on human-relations issues.

Forbath said government officials and community group members are considering the El Modena Community Center in a residential neighborhood several blocks from the doughnut shop, as a possible gathering site.

This week, commission staff members will ask neighborhood residents and business owners how they feel about letting the men gather in the center's parking lot, she said.

Margaret Reister, executive director of the community center at 18672 E. Center St., said the board of directors will vote on the matter this month. "We'd like to get the situation taken care of by the end of the month," she said.

Reister said El Modena Park on Hewes Street also is being considered.

Forbath said local business owners, residents and the Orange Police Department asked commissioners earlier this month to act as mediators during the site-selection process.

"We'd like to get them moved as soon as possible," Forbath said. "I think some of the business owners are getting anxious."

"This is the first time anyone has ever tried to do anything about the problem," said Rick Kerby, who oversees 12 doughnut shops for Yum Yum Donuts Inc.

"If they could just convince them to go somewhere else, it would do wonders for my business," he said. Kerby said sales at the shop in Orange have dropped 30 percent since last year.

Kerby said the workers have gathered around the shop several years, but, "In the past six months it's gotten worse. It used to be just a few people. Now, it's more than a hundred."

Kerby and other business owners said they do not know how the open-labor market first got started. Workers and employers learn of the labor market through word of mouth, they said. "Their friends tell them they can get a job here, so they come," Kerby said.

He said the workers have told him they earn about \$5 an hour, in cash, for landscaping and construction jobs acquired in the parking lot.

Most of the men apparently are undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America, Kerby said.

Although most apparently live in Orange within walking distance of the shop, local business owners said some from as far away as Santa Ana, Anaheim and Garden Grove ride buses to the doughnut shop.

Their employers range from local contractors who regularly hire 10 to 20 men to neighborhood residents who hire a couple of men for a day, Kerby said.

"On Saturday mornings, some people drive down from the hills in their Mercedes and hire one or two people to work in their yards," he said.

He said the crowds have grown so large in recent months that customers sometimes have a hard time getting into the parking lot. He said some cus-

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Margaret Reister, executive director of El Modena Community Center

tomers are frightened away by workers who assume they are employers.

"It's a real problem," Reister said. "My son's friend drove in there once to get a cup of coffee and a group of workers jumped in the back of his truck. They thought he was there to give them jobs."

Kerby said he has complained several times to local police, who suggested he several place "No Loitering" signs in

the parking lot. The signs, printed in Spanish and erected about two months ago, apparently were ignored, he said.

On Friday morning, police officers stopped by three times to tell workers to move away from the doughnut shop and stand on a nearby sidewalk.

"We haven't arrested anyone, because we have seen no violations of law," Sgt. Manuel Ortega said. "But I think the people who live and work near there are uncomfortable."

He said that some residents have suggested that officers check the workers' citizenship status. "But we don't involve ourselves with immigration issues," Ortega said. "That's not our jurisdiction. That's the job of the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service)."

Ortega said he did not know if the INS had ever conducted raids in the doughnut shop parking lot, but about 20 suspected undocumented workers were picked up from the site about a year ago.

Another open-labor market at Fifth and Euclid streets in Santa Ana became the center of controversy during an INS raid in February.

After that raid, INS officials mistakenly deported 15-year-old Mario Moreno-Lopez to Mexico. The boy was a legal alien resident but did not have his green card, his proof of legal residency, with him when he was apprehended.

Forbath said she has not heard complaints from residents or business owners about the Santa Ana site or another similar open-labor market at Placentia Avenue and Center Street in Costa Mesa.

"The store owner at Fifth and Euclid welcomes the workers," Vargas said. "He seems to think they are his best customers."

The business owners near Chapman and Hewes and Orange said they will not be happy until the workers find another place to gather.

"If it continues this way for a couple more months, I won't be able to stay in business," Jezek said. "They keep our customers away."