

# SMC Student Parties May Lead to Stricter Ordinance, But No Quick Fixes

By Jennifer Wake

The quiet tree-lined street on Thune Avenue in Moraga, dotted with well-kept ranch style homes and neighbors waving hello as they head out on errands, is far from the fraternity-style atmosphere depicted in movies like *Animal House* – or even of those homes on fraternity row in Berkeley. But for many Thune Avenue residents, the street has been transformed too often into a raucous party zone unsuitable for a family neighborhood.

Over the past year, Thune Avenue has become a regular stop for local police, who have been called out to quiet down large parties centered at three homes on the street which are rented to Saint Mary's College students.

The extra calls, coupled with the public outcry from Thune residents, prompted the Town Council to propose a revision to its existing noise ordinance to include stiffer fines (up to \$1,000 for a third warning within 90 days) and adding to the definition of a "loud and unruly party." The new definition would include those gatherings which cause "excessive traffic or obstruction of public streets due to crowds or vehicles, public drunkenness, or the service of alcohol to minors."

One Thune resident, who asked not to be named, agrees with the new ordinance. "There's no question that there have been really loud parties," he said. "It's too bad we have to do something like this, but the landlords are not taking responsibility."

Saint Mary's College senior and Thune Avenue resident Chris Burns is concerned that the ordinance will be used predominantly against student renters.

With the lack of nightlife in Moraga (a bar, late night cafes or bookstores that stay open past 8 p.m., or even the old bowling alley on Moraga Road), Burns says the Saint Mary's students who live in Moraga rentals will continue to end up gathering at private homes in residential areas.

While Saint Mary's College does offer occasional events on weekends, most activities sponsored by the college center around lectures, cultural events, theatrical performances, and barbecues with music in the afternoons during the week. Live events outdoors and on weekends are infrequent.

The college plans to increase the number of events having to do with the freshman experience in August, but has no plans to increase the number of events like Gaelstock –



This otherwise quiet street in Moraga has been the regular site of large parties at three rentals housed by Saint Mary's Students, sparking a stricter noise policy within the Town and a sharp divide between neighbors. SMC Student Parties May Lead to Stricter Ordinance, But no quick fixes

Photo Jennifer Wake

one of the largest student events on campus that features live music, a barbecue, and outdoor activities.

Burns thinks that if they had more frequent events like Gaelstock, students "wouldn't go so crazy and over intoxicate themselves when those events come around." The college, however, must take many things into consideration when planning these events.

"It's a balancing act," Holtz said. Saint Mary's is considering developing a newsletter for homes built close to the campus, which would list cultural events open to the public and alert neighbors of upcoming events that might be loud. The newsletter may also include contact numbers which neighbors could call if there was a problem.

Community and Government Relations Director Tim Farley has been working closely with Town of Moraga Planning Director Lori Salamack to discuss the Moraga Center Specific Plan (MCSP), which proposes increased student housing in Moraga as well as the redevelopment of the Moraga Center and the Rheem Valley Shopping Center. New amenities proposed include a sports bar, late night bookstore, cafes, a bed and breakfast, and a community center.

Salamack has given the college a preliminary overview of the plan, and is scheduled to meet with Saint Mary's representatives next month to further review it, said Farley.

In an assessment commissioned by the Town of Moraga regarding the MCSP, Economic & Planning Systems (EPS) – which

specializes in land use policy – stated the need for more amenities geared toward college students.

"Unlike most college towns, Moraga has not identified with the needs of the Saint Mary's College student population and incorporated uses that would encourage students to live in the town as well as spend time there on weekends," the EPS report stated. "With no bars, dance clubs, or live music venues in town, students have to leave town for similar gathering places."

Through the revitalization, the Town of Moraga hopes to provide reasons for Saint Mary's students and Moraga residents to spend more time (and more money) in the town they call home.

The process, however, takes time.

"I think what people in Moraga have to realize is that without more on-campus housing, they are going to have more and more kids in the community," Burns said. "They have to wake up and figure this out. Current amenities on campus are nowhere to be found. We have nothing to do. They need to realize it before no one wants to come here anymore."

"We have continued for the past three years to increase college campus events," said Saint Mary's College spokesperson Debra Holtz. "We think they are positive, and many are open to the public. We want to be a resource to the community and want to create a vibrant campus community for students."