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City urged to use church for teen center

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After campaigning almost three years for a new Teen Center in Mountain View, a local youth group has its sights set on an Escuela Avenue church.

Mountain View's current Teen Center, in a small building at 298 Escuela Ave., serves middle schoolers and is only open a few days a week. The group Youth Motivated for Action and Involvement (YMAI) — part of Peninsula Interfaith Action — and several city council members have long hoped to see a new, larger teen center for high schoolers, but an initiative to use the city's Senior Center for teens during off-hours failed earlier this year after local seniors objected.

Now, the teens are renewing their focus on The Rock Church of Mountain View, at 263 Escuela Ave. The city council approved a contract in June to pay \$3.5 million to buy the church, which is looking to move into a larger facility.

The church is across the street from the Senior Center and current Teen Center, and a city report describes it as "strategically located for a wide range of future public uses that could support/complement existing services in the neighborhood."

It's a great location and a large building that will allow for many activities, said Tameeka Bennett, who helps manage the youth effort as a community organizer for Peninsula Interfaith Action. A center will give local teens a place to stay out of trouble, she said.

"A lot of the teens (in Youth Motivated for Action and Involvement), they have friends who are in gangs," Bennett said. "They're just really proud of staying out of violence, tired of hearing about friends getting in fights."

Mayor Margaret Abe-Koga, who has been an advocate for youth initiatives, said the city has not yet determined a use for the church site. The council will have to work through environmental reports and other processes before it determines an official use, but Abe-Koga said she hopes to see the council begin discussions this fall.

"We have the property; we just have to decide what to use it for," Abe-Koga said.

A teen center has frequently been floated as a potential use for the church. Abe-Koga said she hadn't heard many other ideas floated, though it could be used for senior center parking or for the city's Police Activities League, possibly in conjunction with a teen center.

Any use will be a few years in coming. Under its agreement with the city, the church is able to lease the building until at least December 2010, with an option to extend to June 2011.

Bennett said it was a "big disappointment" when her organization learned about the length of the lease, "but all in all, that location is perfect for a teen center in two years, rather than senior parking in two years."

Youth Motivated for Action and Involvement is holding a community meeting 7 p.m. Thursday at St. Joseph Church, 582 Hope St., to encourage support for a new center. Local youths will discuss their experiences with gangs and other issues in the neighborhood and share why a teen center would help, Bennett said.