

The Catholic Anchor, Vol. 8, Issue 11 – June 2, 2006

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Photos by Fr. Fred Bugarin

About 200 people attended the May 17 AFACT meeting at Central Lutheran Church in Anchorage. The meeting addressed the need for affordable, accessible after-school programs for area schoolchildren.

AFACT spotlights the problems faced by West Fairview children

**By Kelly DuFort
Anchor Writer**

Last month, nearly 200 people streamed into Central Lutheran Church to hear testimony before Mary Jane Michael, executive director of the Anchorage Municipality's Office of Economic and Community Development. The topic: the need for affordable, accessible after-school activities for students in the West Fairview neighborhood.

The meeting was organized by Central Lutheran Community Organizing Ministry, a member of AFACT (Anchorage Faith and Action — Congregations Together).

AFACT is a union of 12 local faith congregations, four of which are Catholic.

Leading up to the May 17 meeting, AFACT members met one-to-one with parishioners and neighbors in an effort to address quality-of-life issues in their communities. The issue that surfaced repeatedly was the need for safe, low-cost after-school programs in the Fairview neighborhood west of Gambell and Ingra streets.

At the start of the meeting, Donovan Lieb, an eighth-grader at Central Middle School, stood at the front of the spacious church with four other boys. Wearing a hooded sweatshirt, with long bangs brushing his eyes, Lieb, 14, explained how a group of Central Lutheran youth took their pastor on a tour of their neighborhood.

"On 10th and Eagle, there were drugs. On 11th and Denali, there were drugs ... On 15th and Fairbanks — prostitutes," Lieb said. "We can't play here ..."

Behind him, a large-screen map of West Fairview pointed out places that youths equated with vandalism, arson, prostitution, rape, drugs and public inebriation.

Elizabeth Dick, a member of Central Lutheran, told the crowd that options for safe recreation in West Fairview exist at Denali Elementary, but the after-school programs there can cost \$375 per month. To help fill the need, Central Lutheran church offers a free, volunteer-operated "drop-in" program that cares for about 30 students three days a week.

Dick said public resources seem to be well allocated across the Gambell-Ingra thoroughfare but are not accessible to children west of the busy streets who must travel through areas rife with drugs, alcohol and highway traffic to get to community centers.



East of Gambell and Ingra, after-school programs are offered at Fairview Elementary School, where there is no charge, and at the city's Fairview Recreation Center, which owns a bus. Scholarships are offered for its summer programs. Similar options do not exist in West Fairview.

"Our children deserve better," Dick said after presenting the group's research.

Single mom Julia Cress stepped up to the microphone to tell Michael about her struggle to care for her four children. Cress said that she works 40 hours per week and that one-third of her income is spent on childcare.

"I cannot possibly afford to enroll my children in after-school

programs that they have at Denali, though they are incredibly wonderful," she said. "I absolutely love the school and I love my little house."

Denali Elementary teacher Marcus Wilson stood up to talk about the changes in the Fairview neighborhood he was born and raised in. As a child, he said, he felt safe exploring the neighborhood with his buddies in the "tight-knit community."

"I don't think it was the city's intention to forget about this part of Fairview," he said, "but this neighborhood

just kind of found itself in a hole. ... It really isn't safe for our kids to walk around the neighborhood and have that access to Fairview rec center."

After 13 people gave testimony, it was Michael's turn. Seated at a table at the front of the church, she explained that she's working to help set the municipality's goals for the next three years.

"I can assure you that childcare in this neighborhood will be one of the highest priorities," Michael, a mother of four, told the crowd.

"It's opened my eyes. This is a unique island in our city. The boundaries do tend to isolate children and families. I've learned a lot and I appreciate it," she added.

Michael publicly agreed to work with the group to develop affordable, accessible recreation programs for West Fairview kids and to follow up with AFACT leaders within a month.

After the meeting, Michael called AFACT's grassroots effort "awesome" and said she was impressed with the group's research.

"They've done 50 percent of the work," Michael said. "They're really making it a partnership."