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Crackdown on Wilmington gang sought

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By Larry Altman, Staff Writer

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The Los Angeles City Attorney's Office is seeking an injunction against members of the East Side Pain gang that could put a stranglehold on their influence in Wilmington's notorious Ghost Town neighborhood.

A petition filed last week in Los Angeles Superior Court targets 52 members of a gang believed responsible for drug dealing, numerous homicides and other criminal activity in the east Wilmington area.

If approved by a judge on Tuesday, the injunction will prohibit gang members from congregating in parks and the street, drinking in public, and staying out after 10 p.m.

"It's just the most effective tool out there, especially with the numerous complaints of narcotic activity," said Sgt. Paul McKechnie, head of the gang unit at the Los Angeles Police Department's Harbor Division.

The injunction would create a 0.88-square-mile "Ghost Town Safety Zone" bounded by Avalon Boulevard, Deloras Drive, Wilmington Avenue, Lomita Boulevard, Drumm Avenue and Pacific Coast Highway, overlapping the borders of an injunction already in place that imposes restrictions on the Eastside and Westside Wilmas gangs in the rest of the community.

The Wilmas gangs have primarily Latino memberships. East Side Pain, also known as Ghost Town Bloods, is a predominantly black gang.

"The East Side Pain gang has used intimidation, violence and fear to hold this community in Wilmington hostage to its insidious activities for far too long," City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo said in a statement.

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An injunction in Ghost Town would be the latest assault on a 70- to 90-member gang controlled by nine families who deal crack cocaine.

On July 31, 2007, hundreds of police officers served 55 warrants in the neighborhood, arresting more than 40 members of the gang.

The City Attorney's Office also successfully filed suit against five property owners, charging them with creating a public nuisance with drug dealing. The U.S. Attorney's Office seized five properties.

About 30 people went to prison, resulting in a slower drug trade. It rebounded as those who used to watch the narcotics sales moved into the business.

"The younger ones have taken up the drug trade," Deputy City Attorney Jule Bishop said.

According to a police report, 635 people have been arrested on narcotics charges in Ghost Town since Jan. 1, 2005, including 81 since the massive raids; police responded to 56 calls of "shots fired" with 18 victims since 2005; and two people have been slain since last year's raids.

"The first wave was to go after people that sold drugs," Bishop said. "For a while, people thought it would be enough, but it hasn't been. The office decided to pursue another enforcement procedure."

For months, police and prosecutors compiled evidence against the gang, watching drug deals

and keeping track of its activities.

"The violence in the area seems to run from graffiti to smoking dope in front of kids and homicides," Bishop said. "Their customers are strangers, people from all walks of life."

The injunction petition identifies gang members by name and nickname, including "Flame," "Bones," "Green Eyes," "Junebug," "Killa" and "No Good."

Some of the 52 include those who are slated for release from prison in coming years. No minors are included.

Two of the designated gang members already are serving life sentences. More names can be added.

So far, officers have served nine members with affidavits ordering them to appear in court. They hope to serve as many as they can before Tuesday's proceeding, but don't have to serve them all.

Each gang member can fight the injunction.

The injunction allows police to arrest gang members associating with one another; intimidating anyone in the safety zone; carrying guns, ammunition and illegal weapons; using, possessing or selling drugs; acting as lookouts to warn when police are coming into the community; obstructing traffic; using alcohol in public view; carrying vandalism tools or committing graffiti; loitering in a public place

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and trespassing.

A gang member convicted of any of the offenses can be barred from entering the neighborhood.

It also creates a curfew of 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. and orders the gang to stay away from Pocket Park, a tiny lot at Watson Avenue and O Street.

"It's been a place where they stand to let you know who's open for drug sales," Bishop said. "We have asked the court to say, 'No East Side Pain gang members on that lot.'"

The gang also must stay away from Banning High School.

Since the arrests last summer, the City Attorney's Office also has worked with community members to improve the quality of life in Ghost Town.

Their work has included:

Beautifying Watson Park, replacing graffiti with murals and new equipment.

Targeting nearby auto dismantlers for code violations. Pick Your Part was charged with two violations of the California Health and Safety Code for unlawful disposal of hazardous materials and could face up to three years probation and a \$200,000 fine.

Holding a health and safety fair for more than 1,000 residents.

Developing community leaders to meet with police and prosecutors to organize community projects.

Prosecutors said major crimes, including homicide, rape, robbery, burglary, auto theft and assault, are down 17 percent since July 31, 2007. Other crimes are down 22 percent.

City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who represents the Harbor Area, said work has been done to improve street lighting and roads, keep heavy trucks out of the neighborhoods and pick up bulky items and dumped trash. New sidewalks are planned.

"In our ongoing community meetings in far east Wilmington, it is clear that this neighborhood continues to be intimidated by gang members," Hahn said. "This injunction is a good tool to allow the LAPD to crack down on violent gang members and return the neighborhood to the people that live there."

larry.altman@dailybreeze.com

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