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Another view

Healthy communities mean healthy youth

By Bill Mullin and Robert Tobin

Auburn residents will remember 1996 as the year that traffic congestion and other threats to the foothills' golden standard of living became a matter of public debate.

Amidst all the talk about creeping urbanization, however, perhaps its most "creepy" indicator was a passing news story that could have provided the most compelling argument yet for concerted action to protect our community's future.

Although the news wasn't as bad as front-page headlines indicated, every parent recoiled at last autumn's story about the local youth who seemingly disappeared while hitchhiking away from a local middle school. Collective relief when our worst fears did not subsequently materialize ignored volatile conditions that continue to make this averted disaster a catastrophe waiting to happen.

With children under age 18 the fastest growing element of California's fastest growing population, Placer County is at the forefront of changes in the environment in which our young people develop.

Examples of these changes have become too statistically obvious to deny. Whereas extended families were once the national norm, intact families became the exception within just one generation. Working parents now constitute the majority of Placer County. Such circumstances combine to leave fewer relatives or neighbors around to provide the friendly smile and firm hand that guided today's adults along the path to maturity.

All young people are challenged by these relatively recent developments, but middle school students are most vulnerable. Too old for baby sitters and too young to drive, they are left largely to their own devices between the time that school gets out and parents' work ends. Extra hours are added to this vulnerable time frame due to school days shortened by parent-teacher conferences or training meetings (Note: The feared-kidnapping story occurred at the end of an entire week of so-called "min-

imum" school days.)

The growing tendency to blame parents for wandering children ignores how their availability to influence such situations has fundamentally changed. Such finger pointing is at best unhelpful; more importantly, it is also misdirected.

Family remains a powerful impact on every child's present well-being and future prospects. However, recent research on 112 American towns about the size of the Auburn area, by Dr. Dale Blyth, finds that *the level of parent-child interaction is about the same in our most and least "healthy" communities*. Instead, "Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth" concludes that only when community-level institutions — educational, civic, religious and media — join parents in a commitment to youth development that a "healthy" environment emerges.

This research indicates that while "troubled youth" certainly create problems of their own, they are better understood primarily as a *consequence* rather than a *cause* of an unhealthy living environment. They serve a function much like a miner's canary, alerting us to the need for immediate, concerted action to resolve underlying issues that have economic and social implications that ultimately undermine our present prosperity and future opportunities.

Everyone agrees that young people need to do things for themselves, but they cannot do it alone. The Boys and Girls Club's effort to acquire the recently closed White Buffalo night club as a permanent "spot" for local teens to socialize is but one example of local initiatives whose success will be determined by their ability to attract tangible, ongoing, communitywide support. To find out how you can get involved, call the Boys and Girls Club at 889-2273.

We need not only "just do it," as a commercial advises, but should do it *now* before this year slips by as fast as the last one.

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