Barrio Logan residents say enforcement of city-designated truck route is low

An 18-wheeler made its way down 26th Street in the Logan Heights neighborhood of San Diego on Wednesday, August 27, despite the sign posted for no truck traffic over 5 tons allowed.

(John Gibbins / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

City Council’s resolution has done little to divert 5-ton trucks away from residential streets, some say

Residents of Barrio Logan say enforcement has been too lax to keep many heavy-duty trucks off their neighborhood streets, despite a recently approved city resolution.

The San Diego Police Department in December committed to enforcing a new resolution designed to cut down on big truck traffic in the neighborhood to improve air quality, safety and health.

The Union-Tribune recently requested citations related to the resolution, issued from Dec. 3, 2018, to Aug. 15. According to those records, police issued 41 citations to vehicles found driving on prohibited streets in Barrio Logan. Most tickets were given between March 12 and Aug. 14.

Police also issued one citation in January to a 5-ton truck parked on a prohibited street in Barrio Logan, out of 113 similar citations issued throughout the city from December to August.

“That’s nothing,” said resident Philomena Marino of the citations in Barrio Logan. “That just tells you they are not here; they are not present.”

City officials referred questions about the citations to police who, when asked last week, did not provide specifics about their enforcement levels. They said more urgent priorities play a part.

“All activity (radio calls and self-initiated activity) is prioritized in a manner that places emergent public safety issues over nuisance/annoying issues,” said Sgt. Michael Stirk.

Last year, the San Diego City Council passed a resolution prohibiting 5-ton commercial vehicles from several residential streets in Barrio Logan, essentially re-routing that traffic to a city-designated truck route. The preferred route takes trucks down Harbor Drive, which allows for entrance onto various freeways and is away from homes and schools.
The city set aside $1,319 for 11 signs on prohibited streets in the community and nine signs to identify the truck route.

Citations are issued to semi-trailers for failing to obey signage on those prohibited streets.

One of the signs posted in the Logan Heights neighborhood.

(John Gibbins / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The resolution came as a result of residents and the Environmental Health Coalition petitioning the city to re-route heavy duty truck traffic away from residential areas.

Residents and advocates say, despite the resolution, they continuously see trucks driving off the city-designated truck route and onto prohibited streets.

They want the police department to increase enforcement and actively monitor the prohibited streets.

When informed of residents' concerns and asked if the department plans to increase enforcement, a police spokesperson wrote in an email, "We would encourage residents to submit a traffic enforcement request via our website or Get-It-Done App to request additional enforcement."

The city's resolution prohibits trucks from seven streets, with exemptions for commercial vehicles over 5-tons and over 13 feet and 6 inches high, known as “high and wide” vehicles. That exemption was made for trucks with specialty cargo, because the Navy-owned pedestrian bridge on 32nd Street has a clearance level that is too low for them.

Trucks delivering to businesses in the area also are exempt.

Barrio Logan’s zoning allows for residential, commercial and industrial, which makes it common to find a single-family home next to a commercial building or a recycling center.

The community has been identified by the state as having high levels of pollution.

Marino, who lives in the only area zoned as exclusively residential, said she initially felt relieved when the resolution passed, but now she is disappointed because she feels it has had no impact.

“Data speaks volumes,” Marino said. “It took more than three months for the first ticket to be issued. That is not sending the message to the drivers or companies to take the truck route and to stop taking shortcuts through the neighborhood.”

Residents grew concerned after a semi-truck burst into flames after hitting two fire hydrants, a utility pole and a parked car on Main Street earlier this month. The crash took out electricity for more than 4,200 customers.

Residents and advocates said they have been documenting and reporting vehicles that deviate from the preferred truck route. They say 41 citations is nothing compared to what they see in the community every day.
The Environmental Health Coalition presented a proposal to the City’s Environment Committee in April 2018, asking that the city adopt the “Barrio Logan Clean Air and Safe Street Ordinance.” They recommended the city create a truck route, expand the number of prohibited streets and create a clear path for enforcement.

The Port District, Caltrans and the Barrio Logan Planning Group were in support of the proposal.

Upon seeing the number of citations, Environmental Health Coalition’s Executive Director Diane Takvorian said it is clear the actions being taken by police are inadequate.

“Whatever they are doing isn’t working,” Takvorian said. “We need them to increase enforcement.”

On a recent early Thursday afternoon, Environmental Health Coalition staff counted 16 heavy duty trucks driving on Boston Avenue in a span of 40 minutes. Although they counted zero trucks driving on Main Street in a span of 20 minutes, at least two of the 16 trucks they counted on Boston came from Main Street.

“The citations are evidence that the truck (resolution) enforcement is currently last on the list of SDPD actions,” Marino said. “It feels (like) importance is not being given to our residents whose health is impacted by 5-ton commercial vehicles but rather (to) scooter complaints from other neighborhoods.”

Maria Emilia Rodriguez, a resident of the Barrio Senior Villa Apartments, on Newton Avenue between 26th and Sicard Streets, said she is awakened at all hours of the night and early morning because heavy duty trucks park in front of her window.

She is recovering from major surgery and said that in the 13 years she has lived there truck traffic has been an issue.

“But what can I do?” Rodriguez, 69, asked. “Put up with it. God willing, this issue will be resolved.”

Miguel Espinoza, resident manager of the villas, said he has given up on calling police and instead asks truck drivers parked directly outside the villa to move. Sometimes it works and other times it does not, he said.

Councilmember Vivian Moreno, who represents the community, has requested a report from the department on the enforcement of the resolution. That presentation is tentatively scheduled for Sept. 18.