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## **“Good Neighbor” Liquor Stores Are Smart Business**

By John Russo

Oakland residents, especially those who live in our more challenged neighborhoods, are fed-up with nuisance liquor stores. They demand change. City Hall is finally listening *and* acting.

Over the past four years the City Attorney’s Neighborhood Law Corps lawyers have attended hundreds of town hall meetings. Frustrated community members consistently identify nuisance liquor stores as their neighborhood’s most pressing problem. These stores are all too often magnets for littering, loitering, alcohol sales to minors, drug dealing, prostitution and shootings. In most cases, the owners/operators share the same concerns and work with the City to rid their stores of the ‘business killers’ of drug dealing, loitering and litter.

Let’s be clear about two things: first, it would be politically easy, but wrong, to paint with a broad brush and target all liquor stores. There are dozens of neighborhood stores in Oakland that don’t have a history of the unsavory activity associated with the nuisance stores. In fact, just two years ago, at the request of my office, more than 100 members of the Yemeni American Grocers Association signed a voluntary pledge to be “good neighbors”. These store owners/operators agreed to limit their store operating hours, refrain from selling fortified alcohol and drug paraphernalia, and attend community meetings to stay connected with the neighbors.

Second, the large supermarket chains continue to redline large parts of our city. Because they refuse to serve whole neighborhoods in West and East Oakland, small neighborhood food markets are necessary and are most often an important asset to our community.

There is no conflict between maintaining a profitable business and ridding a store of community-identified nuisances. It has always been the first choice of the Neighborhood Law Corps to work with the owner/operator to establish better lighting or more security for the safety of the customers, the store employees and ultimately the neighbors.

In the last year, neighbors asked for help in fixing the problems at A&J Liquors (23rd Avenue at E. 15th Street) -- just 2 blocks from Garfield Elementary School. In less than nine weeks, the owner of A&J Liquors, as well as the owner of the property, signed a compliance plan designed to clean up the store and thwart dealers who use the corner to sell drugs.

Al's Liquors, the corner of Martin Luther King and West Street (3841 West Street), had been the site of numerous police calls, drug dealing, blight and litter for more than four years. Neighbors complained to the City Council about the crime-riddled corner the business occupied and even provided videotape to city officials of the drug dealing in the doorway of the store.

Only after city agencies had exhausted every possible option of working with the owner, Al Alaoudi, to fix the problems at his business, did the Neighborhood Law Corps take the steps to shut the business down. Now, that corner in West Oakland is home to a bustling .99¢ convenience store that does not sell alcohol and is thriving with the new customers who patronize it.

Our Neighborhood Law Corps has shut down five nuisance liquor stores and cleaned up an additional eleven stores throughout Oakland in the past two years. While we are not demonizing all liquor store operators, it is obvious that drug dealing, loitering, littering and drive by shootings don't take place at the nail salon, the coffee shop or the dry cleaners. It is possible to be a conscientious business operator, sell liquor responsibly, and provide the diapers and milk essential to local residents.

In the next few weeks, we intend to put before the City Council our recommendation for stepping up enforcement to turn around nuisance liquor stores. While we have seen some success, we have only begun to make a difference; some neighborhoods are still under siege. Liquor store operators are beginning to realize they are on notice, but it doesn't have to be all 'stick' and no 'carrot.' Working to rid our neighborhoods of the 'business killers' of litter, loitering and drug dealing will be beneficial for everyone.

