

Seven East County smoke shops raided by police

By Jake Christie

FOR THE EAST COUNTY CALIFORNIAN

Jan. 21, 2009 was a bad day to own a smoke shop in East County. At noon, seven shops in El Cajon, Santee, and La Mesa were raided by the police of each town.

Fifteen-thousand glass hash pipes, bubblers, bongs and other hemp-smoking equipment were taken, and while there were no arrests, El Cajon Police Lieutenant Steve Shakowski said that each of the store owners may be charged with misdemeanor offenses.

The smoke shops searched in El Cajon were: "Vishions," "Up in Smoke," "Joe's Tobacco," "Illusions," and "Puff-N-Stuff." In La Mesa, the LMPD hit the "Puff-N-Stuff" outlet in that town, while Santee Police served a search warrant to the "Puff-N-Stuff" in that community.

All the stores were sent "cease-and-desist" letters by the County District Attorney's office some time before the raids were conducted.

One of the community groups that pushed for the crackdown was Communities Against Substance Abuse (CASA); according to their spokesperson Dana Stevens, this move by East County police was months in the making.

"We've had a task force for ten months," Stevens said. "There was a lot of advocacy from residents to speak out against these stores."

According to Stevens, an

undercover police officer was sent in to each of the stores and used what she called "dirty talk" (i.e., drug user slang) to ask if the shops were selling certain sorts of pipes. She would not call what happened at any of the seven stores a raid, but preferred to call each a "service of a warrant."

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Dana Stevens

"They can stay in business if they aren't selling illegal paraphernalia," Dana Stevens replied when asked if the "warrant services" were meant to close the stores.

She said that three unnamed stores (one in Santee, two in Lakeside) responded to the D.A.'s letters and willingly got rid of the illegal devices.

On the subject of the Santee store that was raided, Stevens said that the Santee Puff-N-Stuff was licensed to only sell tobacco, and yet it was a bong store.

Lt. Steve Shakowski would not talk about the undercover aspect of the operation, but he reiterated Stevens' point about not committing the raids to shut the stores down.

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"We're just trying to get compliance with the law...we're letting business owners know these items are illegal," said Shakowski.

When asked why the East County police were raiding these stores, he responded, "We're just going on what the D.A. tells us."

Comment was hard to get from the affected smoke shops; when

the Santee store was contacted about Steven's claim, the unidentified male clerk would only state "I am not at liberty to say anything," and promptly hung up.

A young female clerk at Vishions who did not identify herself confirmed that the police took everything glass for sale in the shop, but said that they had glasswork at their Mission Beach store.

When asked to comment about the raid she said, "There are bigger problems in El Cajon," and then hung up.