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Attorney General Janet Reno acknowledges applause from California Attorney General Bill Lockyer, right, and others after her speech Monday.

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from:

Attorney general's learning tour of S.F.

She confers with ethnic groups, visits Delancey Street Foundation

By Elizabeth Brennan and Marianne Costantinou OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

In a meeting with San Francisco community leaders, Attorney General Janet Reno said that environmental justice is the "issue of the 21st century" and stopping hate crimes is a priority for her.

"We want to make sure that people who haven't been heard in the community are (heard)," Reno said Monday in a meeting that included Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, U.S. Attorney General Robert Mueller* and five community leaders representing diverse ethnic groups in The City. The group discussed such issues as immigration, gun violence, hate crimes, the alleged spy case involving scientists When Ho Lee and justice for people living in poor communities long used as dumping grounds for industrial waste.

Linda Richardson, a planning commissioner and founder of the South East Alliance for Environmental Justice, hoped Reno would take

local concerns back to Washington. "She has a history of advocacy and concern," Richardson said.

Responding to concerns about increasingly "bold and brave" hate crimes, Reno said she is continuing to work on passing the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Reno also said she is trying to develop an emergency defense fund for smaller communities trying to fight hate crimes and violence in court.

After the meeting, Reno took a two-hour tour of the Delancey Street Foundation, the 28-year-old residential rehab center for ex-cons, drug addicts and street people.

Reno was interested in seeing whether the private center, based at the Embarcadero and Brannan Street, could be used as a national model in other cities to help the nearly 500,000 convicts released from state and federal prisons each year.

After meeting some of the center's 500 residents and learning about the center's job and life skills training, Reno was a fan.

"I've had two of the best hours I've spent in my seven years as attorney general," she said.

What most impressed her, said Reno, was the program's track

record of success and "the human spirit" she witnessed.

I've seen what people can do when there's support and expectations and regard," Reno said.

Mimi Silbert, the program's director and co-founder, pledged to help Reno - who planned to talk to various city mayors - develop a program that would be a partnership between federal and local governments and the community.

If the Delancey Street Foundation is adopted as a national model, Reno pledged to call the other centers Delancey Street. But Silbert said she wanted to see the plans for the new centers before agreeing to that.

But Silbert was optimistic. "I trusted her," Silbert said about Reno. "She got it in the first two minutes, that this is not just 'a program.' If you're going to make this a model, it's got to be a life model. It's not just job skills, it's life skills - how to talk, how to care, how to love, how to be honest . . . how to cook, how to change a tire, how to be honest."

*(Update Note: Current Head of FBI)