

Halfway house rumor is called outrageous

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(ran West edition)

Miller Newton says he wants to clear up a rumor that has been circulating for several months:

"I have no plans to open a halfway house in Madeira Beach, the state of Florida, or any place else," he said during a phone interview from the New Jersey office of his specialty hospital for adolescents with problems such as drug abuse and anorexia.

"This is the most outrageous rumor I have ever heard."

The buzz began about four months ago, when Newton sought permission to add a community room with a television for two small duplexes on property that Newton and his wife, Ruth, once owned at 13280 Fourth St. E.

Fred Hawes, the beach's building official, said the value of the construction is estimated at \$31,000. Newton says he just wants to provide extra living space for residents of the duplexes, who have small units.

But some residents of the neighborhood became concerned, particularly when they noted that Newton had donated the property to the non-profit Christ at the Sea Foundation Inc. in August.

A group of residents showed up at Tuesday's City Commission meeting to say that a "halfway house" or drug abuse treatment center for troubled kids was going to be on the site.

"After years of chasing bad guys," said resident and retired police officer Ron Garcia, "I just wanted to retire to Florida and not have this type of thing in my back yard."

"This is something we do not want in our community," another resident said.

City Manager Kim Leinbach tried to reassure the residents that all changes to the property are within city zoning codes and that there is no plan to use the site differently. Leinbach said the city will make sure the property continues to be used within city regulations.

Leinbach has invited Newton to personally assure residents of his intentions at the City Commission meeting June 16.

Newton, who lives across the street from the property, is a neuropsychologist who has been affiliated with several treatment programs for teenagers, including Straight Inc., whose strict house rules became controversial.

The 59-year-old is also a former mayoral candidate and former chairman of the city's Board of Adjustment, which grants exceptions to city laws for homeowners. And, in the more distant past, he was Pasco County Circuit Court clerk and made an unsuccessful bid to become a congressman.

Newton said he donated the Madeira Beach property to the non-profit foundation so that it can become a revenue source for the Orthodox Catholic Church of America. Based on comparable sales, county property records estimate the property's value at \$115,000.

A local real estate company manages the property, he added, and most residents sign long-term leases.

"When we come to Florida, we don't want to have anything to do with treatment," Newton said. "That's our permanent home down there in Madeira Beach. That's where our sailboat is. That's where we go to get some rest from the struggles of treatment."

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