

Random use of drug-tracking dog approved

By MARK ZALOUDEK
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Chopper, the drug detection dog of the Sarasota County Sheriff's Department, will be allowed to randomly sniff student lockers and parking lots in a broader policy approved by the school board Tuesday night.

Penalties for students caught during random searches will range from referral to their parents and drug rehabilitation programs to suspension from school. In extreme cases, the schools will press for a student's arrest and criminal conviction.

The issue has become a sensitive one as the school board tries to balance drug crackdowns with constitutional rights guaranteeing privacy and freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures.

SARASOTA COUNTY School Board members originally advertised a policy which would have required a search warrant for the dog's narrow use on campus. Superintendent James Fox's goal was to prosecute all suspected juvenile drug users and dealers "to the fullest extent of the law."

Members of the community changed all of that by urging the schools to use the dog in sweeping school searches to enforce school policies.

The new drug search and seizure policy adopted by the board allows principals to decide how best to use Chopper when imposing school or law enforcement sanctions.

"WHAT WE'VE DONE here is given the principals two rather clear paths to follow," noted Fox, who said Chopper's long-debated use will begin this spring with school assemblies and "unannounced searches" in local schools.

"Specifically what we're forbidding is we can't conduct body searches with that animal or inspect automobiles on campus unless there's a search warrant," added board member Tom McElheny.

Board member Dick Doudna reminded the packed City Hall audience that some students with drugs in their cars are clever enough to park just outside of school grounds. In that case, schools or citizens can report the cars to the sheriff's office.

CONTINUED DOUDNA, "The problem is not in our (the schools') backyard. It's in the community's backyard and I wish the people who are pushing us to do these things will also push some other people, too."

Another board member, Kay Glasser, echoed a comment from the audience that a grand jury investigation was needed to halt the flow of drugs from local suppliers.

EARLY IN THE meeting, grinning Sarasota County Commissioner Jerry Hente strode to the board table, brandishing the baseball bat signifying his war on drugs, and urged the school board to provide a drug-free environment on campus.

"You have the public support and I respectfully ask — no I urge and even beg — that you will use the dog and not allow drugs in our schools," he said.

Dr. Hugh Lawson and Susan Richardson asked school officials on behalf of the Sarasota County Informed Parents anti-drug group to use the drug-scenting dog uniformly in all junior high and high schools.

THE NEW DIRECTOR of the Straight, Inc. drug rehabilitation program, Hugh Burns, told

board members he was "delighted" with the policy revision.

"I don't think you could possibly enact a law that's strong enough," he said. Pausing to contain his emotion, he added, "A girl died in Venice this afternoon from an overdose. There isn't anything we can do that's strong enough."

One parent suggested elementary schools be included in the drug searches. Fox explained afterwards he considered Chopper's use "a possibility under limited conditions" in elementary schools.

"When you're dealing with a building of small children, I think tremendous precautions have to be taken. A large dog can scare little kids," he said.

THERE SEEMED TO BE little disagreement that Chopper's routine visits to schools will be in full swing by fall, with some introductory visits the remainder of this school year and during summer school.

One board member has asked the administration to prepare monthly "Chopper Reports" to keep them informed just as board members now receive monthly energy consumption reports.