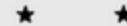


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Tuesday, April 19, 1983

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Sports On Back Page

Section B

P. 2B

2-B CE—Sarasota Herald-Tribune Tues., April 19, 1983

Sarasota Commissioner Seeks Drug Program Funds

By **ROBIN SIMMONS**
Herald-Tribune Reporter

A full audience is expected to be in attendance today when County Commissioner Jerry Hente asks his colleagues to "put their money where their mouths are instead of blowing a lot of smoke" about alleviating drug abuse in the community.

Hente wants the commission to fund \$50,000 each year for the next two years to hire an executive director and clerical help for coordinating the objectives of his Drug and Alcohol Task Force.

Because of the enormous amount of comment that is expected on the issue, the commission has set aside two hours for a public hearing, which

begins at 2 p.m. in the 10th floor meeting room at the County Administration Center.

Hente made his first pitch for the new positions last month. But he received early indications that the commission, with the exception of Board Chairman Bob Anderson, was unconvinced about the need for an executive director without hearing also from the public.

Despite reservations among some of his colleagues, Hente remains optimistic that his request will be given fair consideration. He has received strong support by residents and members of locally established antidrug and rehabilitative groups.

"I'm going to go into that meeting with as positive an attitude as I can muster," he vowed. "I'd like to think that at least I always have an

open mind during public hearings. I'm going to hope that, after this public hearing, those commissioners who aren't seeing so clearly right now will see as they have not seen before."

Hente has steadily acquired a reputation on the commission as a crusader for assorted projects, but his Drug and Alcohol Task Force has consumed most of his time and energy. He banded together representatives from the Sarasota County School Board, the Sarasota County Sheriff's Department, the Venice Police Department, private citizens and groups such as **Straight Inc.**, **Storefront**, and **L.I.F.E. (Living Is For Everyone)** to combine efforts against drugs.

The objectives of the task force primarily focus on drug education and prevention. As with any

non-profit, non-funded venture, volunteers would be relied upon heavily for projects such as "court watches" which monitor sentences given drug offenders by local judges. The executive director would play a crucial role in recruiting, motivating and directing the activities of volunteers, Hente said.

"Someone has to organize and supervise things and make sure a certain number of people show up at the right time and the right place," Hente says. "Otherwise, it will be the biggest mess you've ever seen." The commission needs to "prove to the community it really cares about the drug problem," he added.

As proposed, the county would advertise statewide for the executive director, who would be

paid up to \$25,000 per year depending on his qualifications. Members of the task force would be responsible for screening applicants and interviewing the finalists.

In addition to aiding the task force, the executive director would identify needed legislation, collect and analyze data relative to the nature and extent of substance abuse in Sarasota County and publish a catalog of community resources available to citizens.

The executive director would also prepare grant applications "for any state, federal or private funding as requested by either the task force or County Commission," according to a white paper of objectives from the task force.

