

Neighbors speak up about zoning request for chapel

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- Author/Byline: SHEILA MULLANE ESTRADA
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In the end, it was a standard zoning hearing, filled with testimony directly related to Miller Newton's application for a special exception to found a church in a residential neighborhood.

No evidence was allowed relating to the role Newton played in the controversial Straight drug treatment program he operated in St. Petersburg decades ago or in a similar program he operated in New Jersey.

"That is not relevant. I will not hear evidence as to the merits or demerits of the applicant himself, said city Special Master Herbert Langford Jr. when Lee DeCesare, wife of former Mayor Tom DeCesare, tried to question Newton's background.

Minutes before the hearing started, an argument between Newton and some of his former drug treatment program clients led city officials to call in extra Sheriff's Office deputies for security.

Newton and his wife, Ruth, had threatened to leave the hearing unless they had protection.

But there were no further incidents as the self-described Straight `survivors" sat quietly, wearing green ribbons in "silent protest" of Miller's past involvement in the programs.

"I understand the spirit of this thing, but let's be civil about it," Langford told the nearly 50 people attending the hearing.

Newton's Church at the Sea Foundation, the official owner of the 13280 Fourth St. E property, is seeking city approval to allow a private chapel in a home that is now used by members of the Orthodox Church of Antioch. Newton is a Madeira Beach resident and a priest in the church.

Newton denied claims that he wants to create a drug treatment program on the property. He said he is retired" from drug treatment, and said "even religious organizations would have to be separately licensed by the state to operate a treatment program."

Newton said he also was troubled by accusations that he intended to create a full-scale church. "We do not have a desire for a church. But the city has no provision for a private chapel. This puts us in a double bind. We are trying to be cooperative," he said.

Some residents said the proposed church would disrupt their neighborhood and lower property values. Newton said his property has the highest value in the neighborhood.

Ann Bunting, who owns two properties nearby, said she is concerned that the use could expand in the future and questioned what would happen if the property were sold.

Michael Sherman, a land use planner and a former Straight client, spoke for one of the residents and said traffic created by a 30-seat chapel would disrupt the neighborhood. He said Newton's application failed to meet three of the 10 tests that must be met to be granted the special exception. Newton said Sherman's report was "skewed."

"I live right behind the property. I don't mind the bells (rung for religious services), but I do mind being misled by Dr. Newton and let down by the city," said resident Jill Jones. She said Newton "shouldn't be trusted".

Ken Penenyi, a 28-year neighborhood resident, said the property was a "nuisance and a blight" until Newton purchased it. "Now it's greatly improved. It has uplifted the entire area and the neighborhood," he said.

At the end of the hearing Langford complimented the audience for its decorum. "I realize this has been a little testy," he said.

Langford has 10 days to file his report and ruling with the city clerk. Any appeal would have to be filed in Circuit Court.

- Memo: Correction (1/30/05): Christ at the Sea Foundation is seeking a special exception to found a church in a residential neighborhood in Madeira Beach. An incorrect name ran in Wednesday's edition of Neighborhood Times.

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- Record: 0501265479388525363138