

Halfway house rumor publicly denied

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Correction (6.24.98): James Kelley has officially complained to the U.S. Postal Service about fliers placed in his mailbox without postage. His name was misspelled and the timing of the complaint was incorrect in a Sunday story about a Madeira Beach City Commission meeting.

(ran Beach, West, South editions)

Amid accusations he is deceiving the public, Miller Newton stood his ground Tuesday and once again denied he has plans to build a halfway house at 13280 Fourth St. E.

"I have no plans to build a halfway house in Madeira Beach, in Pinellas County, in the state of Florida or in the United States," Newton told the public at the City Commission meeting.

At commissioners' invitation, Newton attended the meeting to squelch a rumor that the site would become home to a drug abuse treatment center for troubled youth.

Four months ago, Newton sought to add a 18-by-24-foot community room with a television. He received city permission in May. He decided in August to donate the complex of four one-bedroom apartments to the non-profit Christ at the Sea Foundation Inc.

A drug rehabilitation facility in a residential zone would require a variance. Newton told the residents crowded into City Hall that he has no intention of using the site differently.

"All of you know I've served on the Board of Adjustment and was hard-nosed about allowing variances. I was also hard-nosed on people getting a variance after the fact," said Newton, disclaiming any intent to apply for permission to change the use of the residence in the future.

"You don't need a variance," said Jean Barthel of 13201 Fourth St. E. "It's easy to slip people into private residences as a tenant."

Other neighbors said the church wouldn't need a variance, but city attorney Andrew Salzman, reading from the city's land-use code, said all churches, synagogues and houses of worship in an R-2 zone were required to come before the Board of Adjustment.

Newton and his wife, Ruth, have lived across the street from the building for 18 years. The 59-year-old neuropsychologist is a former Orthodox Catholic minister and once ran for mayor. He said he currently spends about one week a month here because of his practice in New Jersey.

He said the programs he is involved with in New Jersey require hospital facilities for neurological research.

"I'm not interested in halfway houses. I have no experience in it," Newton said.

Despite his assertions, his accusers hammered away, until Mayor Tom De Cesare stepped in. Mary Town of E Parsley Drive was asked to leave when she continued to ridicule Newton's credibility from the audience.

Calling for order, Vice Mayor Tom Saxon said, "The property does not violate current regulations. We are here to address the rumor."

Unsing fliers urged residents to protect businesses and the community by attending the meeting Tuesday. Diane

Holtman of Third Street E said she printed the fliers and Mark Jones, also of Third Street, said he put the notices in neighborhood mailboxes.

James Kelly, of Boca Ciega Avenue N, said he will report the fliers to the U.S. Postal investigator as a federal offense violating a law that states anything put in mailboxes must have postage.

A postal official said if a complaint is filed, they would investigate. The penalty for a first offense is to pay the postage for all the pieces.

Newton said he wanted to improve the building with a community room and landscaping to increase the property value for the Orthodox Catholic Church.

"For the last few years I have put money into the building. If there is to be any value to the church, I had to find a way to raise the value and the rent. I couldn't justify adding living space, but I can build the community room," Newton said.

According to county records, comparable properties put the value of the residence around \$115,000.

Newton said the only plan on the horizon is the possibility of an elderly monk from New York moving into one of the apartments. Newton also said he plans to retire to Madeira Beach and would not want to work across the street from a treatment center where people could knock on his door 24 hours a day.

"I don't know why neighbors didn't come up and ask me what's going on," said Newton.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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