

School Concerns Expressed At Meeting

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TEMPLE TERRACE - The Temple Terrace community is tired of being ignored by the school district and it isn't going to take it any more.

That was the overwhelming message from city leaders and other residents during a town hall meeting Tuesday.

The city held its quarterly meeting to discuss issues concerning Temple Terrace and give residents a chance to ask questions. But it was city leaders who spent a majority of the time venting their frustrations with the area's public schools.

Mayor Joe Affronti said some schools aren't safe enough or don't perform well enough. He also said school boundaries don't reflect the community.

Friction between the city and the Hillsborough County school district has existed for years but seemed to boil over two weeks ago when Affronti went to Tallahassee to support a bill that would split the county into as many as nine smaller school districts. For years, the city has asked to be its own school district.

"I'm sure the district has the best of intentions," said parent Linda Beckman. "But I think you're going to find a lot of people who are going to say that's not good enough."

Affronti acknowledged that his Tallahassee visit caught the attention of school leaders, who immediately set up a meeting to discuss concerns. Affronti presented seven recommendations for Temple Terrace schools. The need to improve communication between the city and the district topped the list.

During his seven years in city government, Affronti said, he only met with the district's previous area director for Temple Terrace, Cathy Valdes, twice. Valdes left the job in August.

"Wouldn't it be reasonable to expect the mayor and city manager to know our current area director?" Affronti asked. "I have not met with our area director or our representative on the school board."

Area director Ken Adum attended the town hall meeting and said he aims to improve communication.

"I'm out in your schools all the time," he said. "If you've got a concern, I encourage you to call me."

Adum also defended Temple Terrace's school board representative, Jack Lamb, saying he's very supportive of the schools.

"If you have a meeting or a concern, call him," he said. "He is very responsive and tries to attend as many functions as possible. But his area stretches across Temple Terrace, New Tampa and all the way over to Carrollwood."

Lamb did not attend the town hall meeting.

Student Population

Other city leaders, such as Councilwoman Linda Shattles, expressed concern over some school grades. Each school receives an annual grade from the state based largely on test scores. Greco Middle and Temple Terrace Elementary received C grades.

Many residents believe part of the problem is Temple Terrace schools have a large number of low-income students who don't live in Temple Terrace. At Riverhills Elementary, 69 percent of students receive a free or reduced-price lunch, a service provided to low-income families. At Temple Terrace Elementary, 68 percent get a free or reduced-price lunch, and the number is 65 percent at Greco Middle.

Yet, only 14 percent of Temple Terrace residents with children younger than 18 are below the poverty level, according to the Hillsborough County Planning Commission. Gwen Mora, chairperson for the city's School Improvement Task Force, said the problem is a cycle that's hard to break.

"Because we have so many families that send their children to private schools, the county has to fill those empty slots," Mora said. "But then that influx is not a reflection of our community, which makes our residents want to send their children elsewhere."

Adum said school grades are based on complex figures that sometimes boil down to just a few struggling students.

Affronti also said he is concerned about school safety. He said police responded to 249 incidents at Greco during 2005. Of those incidents, 46 resulted in arrests for crimes such as battery, possession of a weapon and possession of drugs. Police also responded to more than 200 incidents at Temple Terrace and Riverhills elementary schools combined.

Affronti said he wants more emphasis on school safety, but Adum said he is unaware of any major problems.

"I'm not sure where you are getting your statistics from, but they don't match what I've gotten from the principals," he said. "I'm in these schools all the time, and these are good schools. I encourage you to visit these schools because you'll see students on task."

Smaller Districts

City leaders concluded the meeting by saying they want to see changes in the schools.

"I hope this is a start," said Councilman Frank Chillura. "It can't be fixed in a night. We don't want to work against [the school district]; we want to work with you."

But Affronti and Councilman Ken Halloway said they will continue looking into the issue of breaking into a smaller district. Adum cautioned city leaders about the state bill, citing a requirement to have at least 20,000 students in a district. Since Temple Terrace schools have about 5,000 students, Temple Terrace would have to join with surrounding areas, possibly the same low-income areas within the schools' boundaries.

Adum also reminded them to look at the financial issues.

"The bill requires the smaller districts to take on a portion of the debt accrued by the county district," he said. "You've got to ask yourself if you can take that on. Plus, you have to pay for your own board and administrators."

Affronti said he has to see change before he is convinced the countywide system is the best option.

"We need to get to a point where our community no longer thinks we need a small school district," Affronti said. "But we're not there yet."

MAYOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

- Immediately set up lines of communication with the area director and school board representative to meet on an established, frequent schedule.
- Authorize a needs assessment study for Temple Terrace.
- Emphasize safety in schools to include resource officers in elementary and middle schools.
- Allow the Temple Terrace Police Department to actively provide antidrug education and allow the city's police dogs to periodically sniff lockers for drugs.
- Convert Riverhills Elementary to specialize in environmental studies.
- Convert Greco Middle to the city's high school. Convert one of the elementary schools to a middle school.
- Readjust the school boundaries to better reflect the community the school serves.