

Panel backs sex-offender restrictions

Written by Mark Jaeger

Wednesday, 03 March 2010 17:30

Ordinance would ban predators from living within 500 feet of schools, parks

The Village of Fredonia's Public Safety Committee recommended on Monday the adoption of an ordinance that would prevent convicted sex offenders from living within 500 feet of schools, parks and child-care centers.

It had been six months since the committee last met, but a room full of concerned residents showed passions on the issue had not cooled.

The limits became a hot topic last spring, when residents learned a convicted sex offender was living in an apartment building on Martin Drive near the drive leading to the Northern Ozaukee School District shared campus.

Residents at Monday's meeting conceded that an ordinance would not allow the village to force that offender to move, but they insisted it could prevent others from moving into the community.

They noted that similar ordinances have been adopted in Grafton, Cedarburg, Thiensville and Random Lake.

"Our concern is we could become a haven for sex offenders if we don't adopt restrictions," resident Frank Bauer said.

Bauer said Fredonia's reluctance to enact restrictions on sex offenders is becoming common knowledge, creating a perception that could hurt property values.

"This comes down to more than a moral issue. It is an economic issue, too," he said.

Trustee Scott Ehaney, who stepped in as chairman of the committee after John Rudolph resigned from the Village Board last summer, said he is not convinced residency restrictions will make the community safer.

Researching the issue, Ehaney said, he learned that corrections experts are widely critical of similar restrictions.

"There's tons of studies out there that say residency restrictions don't make a

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community safer. The danger is these ordinances have a tendency to drive these people underground,” Ehaney said.

“With the state’s sex offender registry, we know where they are living in our community. With restrictions, the offender in front of us may suddenly become invisible.”

Citing sources who labeled residency restrictions “feel good” laws that have little impact, Ehaney said he worried that people in the community may have an unwarranted sense of protection.

“I don’t want to just feel safer, I want the community to be safer,” he said.

Ehaney said proposed legislation that is making its way through Madison could void virtually all local residency restriction on sex offenders, but the parents said they want an ordinance for as long as it is valid.

Acknowledging that resolve, Trustee Jill Bertram suggested an ordinance that would keep sex offenders from living within 250 feet of schools and parks.

That compromise drew protests from the audience, with some residents saying they would not accept an ordinance placing restrictions on properties closer than 500 feet.

“If you aren’t willing to make the limit 500 feet, how do we place it on a referendum?” asked one resident.

Using maps Village President Joe Short had drawn up last summer, Ehaney said increasing the restricted area from 250 feet to 500 feet wouldn’t affect that many more properties.

On that premise, he backed a motion forwarding the 500-foot restriction to the Village Board.

Trustees are expected to take up the issue at their Thursday, March 4, meeting.