

THE STAR
MAY 5, 1988

COMMISSION WILL ADDRESS YOUTH, FAMILIES

It has long been recognized that the future of any community rests with the youth and the most significant influence upon them is the family.

In an attempt to meet the needs of youth and families, Mayor Paul Esser has proposed a Youth and Families Commission be formed in Sun Prairie. "My objective in creating the commission is for it to bring together resources available to work toward making Sun Prairie a good place for youth and families," Esser said. "The commission will have access to professional resources that are available in Sun Prairie by having the school district, the Police Department and the Parks and Recreation Department as ex-officio members.

I would envision the commission as then moving beyond the local resources to draw upon expertise available from the Dane County Youth Commission and resources at the University of Wisconsin, State of Wisconsin and other interested parties."

As the commission empowers itself through the knowledge it gains, the mayor said he hopes it will become the nucleus of people working to make Sun Prairie a good place for youth and families. I see the Youth and Families Commission accomplishing its duties by working with churches, YMCA, youth sports organizations, schools, police department, parks department and other community groups," Esser said.

Although not yet approved, Esser said he believes the major task of the commission will be to increase the awareness of the positive contributions made to the community by youth and families. "Ultimately," Esser said, "I would like to see the commission be the catalyst that helps other groups within the city to work on making Sun Prairie a better place for youth and families."

Commission Formation

Esser said the commission is something he has wanted to organize since he was elected one year ago, but explained that the timing was not right late last year because of the work being done on the budget and five-year capital projects plan. With the election over, he said, he wants to get the commission going before the city again becomes heavily involved in the budget process.

"My intention was to have this commission up and running next fall," Esser said. "We've got a little window of time where our schedules aren't overlapping."

Another concern the mayor expressed was that the issue not be delayed because he doesn't want it to become politicized. In explanation, Esser said if he decides in the fall to seek reelection, he doesn't want the formation of the commission to be underway because it could be viewed as a political tool.

By recommending the formation of the commission, Esser said it provides for a more effective effort. “What I’ve tried to do is give it (the commission) some legitimate reason for being.”

Although one member of the city council would sit as a member of the commission, Esser said he doesn’t want the commission tied to the council in a reactive way. He also said he doesn’t want to see the commission devoted exclusively to one area of concern such as drug use and abuse. Instead, the mayor said he views the commission as directed more towards positive aspects of youth and families and being involved in doing things to increase the positive aspects of the community.

Although information gathering will be a primary role of the commission, Esser said, “I would hope that isn’t an end in itself.” After the information is gathered, he said the commission should make recommendations for further action.

The commission won’t have a budget at first, but Esser said he would not rule that possibility out in the future. “I’m not convinced that what youth and families in the community need are things that require the expenditure of money,” Esser said, stressing that many things can be accomplished without a budget.

The Concept

“It’s an idea that I’ve had,” Esser said. “I think there’s a role there that the city needs to play.” The mayor stressed, however, that he feels there is a need for the commission to push the city council. In fact, Esser said he believes that over time the commission may actually come to lobby the city council on issues it feels are important.

“We patterned it after the Library Board,” Esser said, explaining that there will be several members from outside the city of Sun Prairie.

The initial duties of the commission, as defined by Esser, would be to: A) advise the city council as requested on matters before the city council affecting youth and families; and B) advocate on behalf of youth and families in the Sun Prairie community.

“That’s wide enough you could drive a truck through it,” Esser said, explaining that as time goes on the commission would assume more responsibility as dictated by need.

Commission Membership

The proposal calls for a seven member commission to be appointed by the mayor. One member will be from the city council, which Esser said gives the commission direct input into the city council. “That tends to keep the city council more aware of what’s happening,” Esser said.

Of the remaining six members, the mayor is proposing that no more than two can come from outside the city limits, but all must live within the limits of the Sun Prairie Area School District. He is also proposing that members can be of any age.

Appointments to the commission would be made each May, with the city council member to be appointed for one year. Other members would be appointed for terms of three years, but initial appointments would be in three classes. Class one would be two members for three-year terms; class two would be two members for two-year terms; and class three would be two members for one-year terms. Ex-officio members would include the Sun Prairie Area School District Administrator, Youth Services Officer and the Director of Parks and Recreation.

“If the people I put on this commission are not enthusiastic, charged up people,” Esser said, “the commission will be a failure.” Once the initial information is completed, the mayor said the commission will need strong people able to provide direction to utilize the information.

Council Responsibility

“The city council’s responsibility is as it always is,” Esser said. “The city council has to respect the people on the commission and follow their recommendations.”

If the council chooses to reject a recommendation from the commission, Esser said council members should be able to explain why. “You’re not going to have active, strong committees very long if you ignore what they’re telling you,” Esser said.

With Tuesday’s presentation to the city council, the matter was referred to the Rules and Ordinance Committee for the development of the appropriate ordinance.

Residents are invited to attend a meeting Monday May 9, at 7 p.m. at the Colonial Club to discuss the commission and the needs of youth and families. Esser said he hopes to determine commission appointees based on those who attend the meeting.

The mayor said he then hopes to have the ordinance creating the commission back to the city council by May 17, after which Esser would announce his appointments. The first meeting, if all is approved, could be held in late May.

Conclusion

“We’ll have to see what the interest of the community is,” Esser said. When asked if it will take time for the commission to get a feel for its responsibilities, the mayor said that depends. “I think we need to give them time to gather information.”

As for how long the commission will exist, Esser said he did consider establishing a sunset (termination date), but decided against it because it is uncertain what the commission will be doing several years from now. In three years, Esser said, the commission could be an adversary of the city council and a sunset date would make it too convenient for the council to eliminate the commission.

As to whether there will ever come a time when the commission is no longer needed, Esser said, “I guess I wouldn’t see it that way. The needs of youth and families will

always be there.” However, he said the direction of the commission will probably change to deal with those needs.

“I really think this is something that is going to continue for the foreseeable future,” Esser said. “At least my lifetime.”