

THE STAR
MAY 12, 1988

YOUTH, FAMILIES COMMISSION PLAN DRAWS SUPPORT

By Jim Ziebarth

About 20 people attended a public hearing called for by Mayor Paul Esser on Monday night in the Colonial Club auditorium to discuss the needs of youth and families in Sun Prairie. The hearing was scheduled in wake of the proposed formation on a new commission designed specially for youth and families.

Esser's objective in forming the commission is to "bring together resources available to work towards making Sun Prairie a good place for youth and families," he said. The mayor indicated that he sees the commission as an advisory group that would focus on gathering information and increasing public awareness about issues that directly relate to youth and families, and not necessarily focusing in on specific issues.

The mayor told the audience he was not interested in the commission dealing with matters such as drug and alcohol abuse or suicide when there are already several agencies in Dane County dealing with those issues. What Esser would like to see in these situations is the commission be the catalyst in possibly forming a citizens group to deal with these problems. He is more concerned with the commission bringing out the positive aspects of youth and family in Sun Prairie, yet still keeping abreast of all issues concerning this demographic area.

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

The hearing was scheduled to help the mayor see how much support there was for the commission and to hopefully aid in the selection process for commission members. Individuals attending were asked at the evening's end to sign their names if interested in serving.

After giving the audience a review of what direction he would like to see the proposed commission take, Esser asked them what they thought about the commission in general and asked for suggestions on topics that could be addressed.

All in attendance felt there is a definite need in the community for such a commission and two ideas the audience offered and would like to see dealt with by the commission was the possible formation of a suicide support group for parents and a youth center.

The suicide support group for parents would be a citizen group separate from the commission; however, the commission would be the catalyst to get the program going. Esser repeated that this is one of the areas of concern for him, but if an adequate model can be developed that he is comfortable with, there should be no problem.

The youth center would be a place for youth to go to in their free time. Esser said that although the youth center would “not be the entire solution for all problems facing youth, but, some kids just like to hang out.” He felt this would also be a good idea.

After many of those attending had spoken, Linda Severson, of 504 Wilson Street, said she was concerned that too much emphasis was being put on youth (i.e. youth center) and not enough on youth and families together.

“Is that the reason we are having so many problems with our 13- through 18-year-olds,” asked Severson, “because we look at them as not part of the family today?”

Also, a question was raised in reference to an answer by the mayor when he was asked if there had been any models looked at from other communities or organization when the idea for the youth and families commission was initiated.

Esser answered he had not looked at any other models and that he wanted this commission to be all its own. Janice Altmann, of 1648 Calico CT., disagreed, saying she didn’t think it would be in the best interest of the commission to not examine other similar groups.

“I can appreciate the fact you want to come up with your own model.” Altemann said to Esser, “but I can see a lot of value in looking at other models.”

“Why don’t we take an eclectic approach,” she continued. “Take a look at what is working, take the good, leave the bad, and pick and choose, just to get a basis to form a foundation.”

“I would also suggest this commission be staffed with a couple of outstanding young people,” said Altmann. “There is quite a difference between what we think might work and what they think might work.”