

THURSDAY
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Sect hearings open calmly

By STEVEN GIRARDI
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Edward Walters was fidgety and nervous as he embarked on five hours of testimony Wednesday during the city of Clearwater's first day of public hearings into alleged criminal activities by the Church of Scientology.

"Excuse my nervousness," began the 44-year-old former high-ranking Scientologist. "I've never been in public like this before."

"We're all a little a tensed-up, I suppose," Mayor Charles LeCher replied.

So began testimony in the much-awaited and much-publicized hearings that city officials said could result in two ordinances aimed at curbing Scientology solicitation and alleged fraudulent activities.

And while the hearings attracted more than a dozen print, radio and television news reporters from local and national media, the large crowd of spectators many expected never materialized.

No more than 80 people showed up at City Hall and many had left by the time the hearings entered the eighth hour. The crowd was quiet and reserved throughout the day, many scratching notes on legal pads. One elderly man sat quietly in the fourth row clutching an American flag and the Holy Bible.



A crowd is packed into City Commission chambers as testimony gets under way in Scientology hearings.

MAY 6, 1982

Hearings televised

Also among the crowd was Paulette Cooper, a New York freelance writer attacked by the church for publishing a book in 1971 titled "The Scandal of Scientology." Ms. Cooper has a \$15.4 million lawsuit pending against the church, which in turn has filed as many as 14 suits against Ms. Cooper.

A large television screen was set up at the City Hall Annex to handle the expected crowd overflow, but it rarely attracted more than 15 people at a time.

Vision Cable of Pinellas, Inc. is broadcasting the hearings live and rerunning them from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m., program director Don Mains said.

Those who showed up for the hearings seemed to be intrigued by what they heard.

"It is gripping," said Laura Brunnelle, an elderly Clearwater woman who sat through most of the day's testimony. "It's a very convincing thing because of it is being so well done.

"It's logic. It's calm. And we're hearing the truth rather than hysteria."

Vincent McAvoy said he was surprised by some of the information about the church's inner workings.

"I wonder about their purpose," said McAvoy, 1739 Woodridge Drive, who watched the hearings from the annex. "And frankly I don't think it's too good. Hopefully, Scientology will move out. I think there is a chance they will."

Commissioners cautious

City commissioners and officials were cautious throughout the hearings, careful to stick to the business side of the church and not delve into religious aspects.

Clearwater Mayor Charles LeCher said he was pleased with the way the hearings were conducted, but "they moved a little slower than we would have liked."

"Some of these people are very nervous," he said of the witnesses. "I have to be very careful not to intimidate them, but try to lead them through their testimony."

Clearwater Police Chief Sid Klein headed a six-man police squad that monitored the hearings and escorted the witnesses. Each of the witnesses is receiving around-the-clock police protection at their request, Klein said.

He said none of the witnesses or city officials has been threatened.

Klein said police scoured the building before the hearings began, but declined to comment about what they were looking for.

"Basically we're dealing with a large number of people in a small physical area in a highly controversial matter," the chief said, explaining the police presence. "It seems to make good sense."



Sun staff photos by HOWARD BALM

Three faces of DeWolf

Ronald E. DeWolf, the son of Church of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, testifies Wednesday in the hearing on the sect at City Hall. He fields a question

(from left), then gives his response and is ready for another query. He testified for about an hour during the proceeding.



City commissioners listen to testimony about Scientology activities during Wednesday's hearing.