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Petitions support city hearings

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CLEARWATER — Two days before Clearwater city commissioners begin public hearings that focus on the Church of Scientology, City Manager Tony Shoemaker gave them a packet of petitions from Clearwater residents who like what the elected officials are doing.

More than 500 people signed petitions stating, "We, the undersigned, strongly urge you to follow through on all of the recommendations to inspect and regulate Scientology activities in order to return their properties to the tax rolls."

Besides receiving copies of the petitions at their Monday meeting, commissioners also talked about a do-or-die effort aimed at diverting traffic away from the heart of downtown Clearwater. They can't take formal action at this meeting — that will happen Thursday — but they can discuss.

Members of the Scientology Victims Defense Fund and other volunteers spent the last three or four months col-

lecting signatures for the petitions, according to fund officer Bob Bickerstaffe. They went door-to-door but also put petitions in local stores and businesses. There are "a few thousand" more signatures on petitions that volunteers haven't collected yet, Bickerstaffe said.

TO MAYOR Charles LeCher, the petitions represent a signal that residents support the public hearings despite the \$110,000 price tag. Money to pay for the hearings comes out of the city's general fund, which is heavily dependent on taxpayers' dollars.

City officials have heard from opponents of the hearings, LeCher noted, but "no one has said they liked what we're doing" until now.

In other action related to the fund, commissioners appeared ready to give the defense fund help in holding an anti-Scientology rally and fund raiser May 22 at Jack Russell Stadium.

The major purpose of the fund, created by local business leaders and community activists, is collecting money to

help ex-Scientologists pay for lawsuits against the church.

The fund has asked the commission to waive rental fees for use of the stadium, and elected officials said they have no problems with the request; however, municipal help is contingent on the fund's ability to register properly as a nonprofit charitable organization with the state of Florida. That has not been done yet.

SHOEMAKER said the stadium has been used before for an anti-Scientology rally. The organizer was ex-Clearwater City Commissioner Richard Tenney. Although the city billed him three times for use of the stadium, he never paid the fees, the city manager said.

On the subject of Cleveland Street traffic, the State Road 60 Committee has a draft resolution members asked commissioners to pass Thursday night. The resolution calls for Clearwater to go to the state for help in realigning State Road 60 away from the central business district downtown. By diverting traffic, local businessman and planners hope to revitalize that area of the city.

Committee chairman Alan Bomstein billed the resolution as a "last ditch" attempt to get state help for a "serious problem."

Actually, there are several problems.

One is choice. Several years ago, Kimley-Horn & Associates Inc., a Tampa consulting firm, presented the city with eight alternatives for rerouting SR 60. Different groups support each one.

ANOTHER problem is cost. The consulting firm's favorite — shifting all SR 60 traffic to Chestnut and Court streets — would cost the city an estimated \$4-million. The committee's preference — for diverting westbound traffic from the Cleveland Street leg of SR 60 on East Avenue to Drew Street — would cost even more, or \$4.5-million.

In light of the problems, Bomstein suggested that the city seek advice from the state on the alternatives and the financing. The Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Development Board and downtown merchants support the proposed resolution, he said.