

## Petitioners back hearings on sect

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The Clearwater City Commission got a pat on the back Monday for its scheduled public hearings on activities of the Church of Scientology.

The praise came in the form of petitions signed by more than 450 people who support the city's efforts "to inspect and regulate Scientology activities."

Meanwhile, about a dozen letters have been sent to the Commission to protest the hearings set to begin Wednesday. The letters were sent by local residents, as well as lawyers and religion-related groups from around the nation.

The petitions were presented to commissioners at their Monday work session by Robert Bickerstaff, a member of the Scientology Victims Defense Fund. City Manager Anthony Shoemaker estimated the petitions contain 700 signatures. Copies provided to the press contain 474 names.

Bickerstaff said petitions with "a few thousand" more names are still circulating. He said both members and non-members helped get the signatures during the past few months to "get a pulse of people and how they feel."

"There's a lot of support out there for what the Commission is doing,"

Bickerstaff said.

The petition reads:

"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."

Commissioners appeared pleased.

"I'm glad that someone has taken the time to get 700 signatures of people who approve of what we're doing," said Mayor Charles LeCher.

Letter writers have been less than enthusiastic about the hearings, though.

In a letter received Friday, John W. Baker, general counsel for the Baptist

Joint Committee on Public Affairs, wrote: "I am certain that the actions which you seem to anticipate taking against the Scientologists is (sic) unconstitutional."

He went on to predict opposition from "mainline" religious organizations, lengthy litigation and damage to the city's reputation if it continues its "attack."

Other protest letters have come from the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation, the National Council of Churches of Christ and the Churchman magazine.

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In other action regarding the Scientology Victims Defense Fund, commissioners agreed to consider a fee waiver request by the group when it completes state registration procedures to gain charitable organization status. The group wants to rent Jack Russell Stadium for a May 22 "educational forum."

Bickerstaff said, however, the forum is tentative and depends somewhat on the outcome of the public hearings.

Dennis English, Tallahassee bureau chief of the charitable solicitation section of the Department of State, said he received a new application from the group Monday.

On cursory review, English said, the document looks as if it will satisfy

state requirements. He said, however, he will send it on to the department's Tampa regional investigative office. Investigators, he said, will try to verify information on the form.

If things go smoothly, he said, the process should take about a week.

In other developments regarding the hearings, the lawyer for the Scientologists said he will make an opening statement to the City Commission Wednesday. Tampa attorney Paul B. Johnson said he will present some items for commissioners to consider in their deliberations.

No decision has been made, he said, whether the sect will participate in the hearings beyond that.