



Clearwater Sun

SATURDAY, September 1, 1984

Metro News

Clearwater, Florida

Officials to study sect's financial records

By HOWARD FRENCH
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Pinellas County tax officials are preparing to wade through thousands of financial documents belonging to the Church of Scientology, in the wake of an agreement hammered out in court earlier this week.

According to Assistant County Attorney Susan Churuti, the development may not constitute a major breakthrough in relations between the county and the sect, but is at least a change in the

Scientologists' position. She said the agreement was worked out under Pinellas County Circuit Court Judge B.J. Driver, and gives the county access to about 10,000 receipts, cancelled checks and other documents to help determine whether the sect is truly a non-profit organization.

The financial question has been the center of a longstanding court battle between the county and the sect, with county officials claiming Scientologists owe \$251,000 in back taxes from 1982 and an-

other \$237,000 in taxes from 1983. Sect spokesmen refute those claims, insisting they are tax exempt, like any other non-profit group.

Sect attorney Paul Johnson said Friday there really is nothing more in the agreement that had not been offered when the county first requested the documents in court about two years ago.

"It's what we've always said from the beginning," he said. "The church has always offered to give the county all those records pertaining to the Florida

operations."

Previously, he said, the county had asked to see financial documents from the Church of Scientology's California headquarters. And that, he said, is like demanding records of the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City, Utah, or Roman Catholic documents from the Vatican, just to examine a local church's financial dealings.

"The judge has ruled that what we are offering is proper," Johnson said. And

the sect has invited county tax officials to use a portion of their former Ft. Harrison Hotel training facility to conduct the document search.

Mrs. Churuti said the county will be taking bids for additional auditors to help with the task of reviewing the documents, saying she is not sure how long the process will take.

"Right now we don't know what's there," she said, "so we don't know how long it will take."