

STATE NEWS

Newkirk worries about scientology link

Tempest brewing over planned drug treatment facility

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NEWKIRK — Crews chip away old paint and hack at knee-high weeds at the abandoned Chilocco Indian School, seemingly unaffected by the tempest brewing in this remote corner of Oklahoma.

When a California group received state permission for a 75-bed drug and alcohol treatment center, Newkirk thought the project on the reservation six miles away would solve local economic troubles brought on by oil and farming slumps.

But the initial euphoria, like the old paint, has chipped away, replaced by distrust, frustration, even fear.

Townpeople say Narconon International hasn't been honest about its affiliation with the Church of Scientology, its financing, its medical credentials and its plans for the project, which will draw mostly out-of-state clients.

They say Narconon denied the project had anything to do with Scientology until Newkirk officials turned up a Scientology magazine with a story headlined "Trained Scientologists to Staff Huge Oklahoma Facility."

And the mayor says Narconon tried to dupe locals at a staged ceremony, where a \$200,000 check and a glowing study were presented to Narconon by a group that turned out to be part of Narconon itself.

Now the town fears it could earn a "cult image" because of the project's ties to Scientology, which follows the teachings of the late science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. Former members have accused Scientology of fraud and mental abuse, and the Internal Revenue Service has challenged its tax-exempt status as a religion.

"People interested in coming to this town will see the Church of Scientology thing — the cult thing — and I think that that image will hurt our possibilities for growth and development," Mayor Garry Bilger said in an interview last month.

Some townspeople say they worry about the kind of people the project will attract and that the stately 80-building campus, built of native Oklahoma stone and tucked



Pastors Mark Jones, left, of the First Baptist Church and Mike Clifton of the First Christian Church pose in front of the entrance to the old Chilocco Indian School in Newkirk. They are among those who oppose plans to turn the school into a drug and alcohol treatment center run by a firm linked to the Church of Scientology. (AP Laserphoto)

more than a mile off the nearest road, will become a Scientology recruiting station.

"I don't think any of us are against drug abusers getting rehabilitation," said Mike Clifton, pastor of the First Christian Church. "(But) there's a lot of concern in the community because we really don't know what these folks are exactly about. What really worries us is what they're not saying."

In the basement of the First Baptist Church, pastor Mark Jones is making copies of a videotape of a British Broadcasting Corp. documentary on Scientology, which he showed to his congregation at a worship service.

The tapes, along with Scientology literature, have been circulating in this town of 2,400. There have been town meetings and public forums, including a sometimes heated session with state officials who approved the Narconon project before the town knew it was supported by Scientology.

"The town got the shaft," said insurance agent Charles Eisenhauer. "I don't think anybody can undo anything that's been done so far." The center is scheduled to open in September.

Narconon officials say Newkirk's concern is inflated and unwarranted. Narconon is a legitimate, worldwide drug and alcohol rehabilitation program with 23 years' experience and an 86 percent success rate, they assert.

Narconon spokesman Gary Smith said he tried to reassure the town that Narconon's "sole intention is to get people off drugs." He said the town has been misled.

"There's fear being put into the town by false information being fed in there by somebody who's in favor of drug abuse. They're either connected to selling drugs or they're using drugs," Smith said.

Smith declined to be more specific about the identity or whereabouts of these "outside sources with criminal motives."

"Trust me. I know," he said.

Another Narconon attempt at persuasion provoked an angry response.

In a letter printed May 18 on the front page of the weekly Newkirk Herald Journal, Narconon president John Duff wrote: "There will be those that will not want Narconon to succeed at Chilocco because they are for drugs and are on the other side in the battle against

drugs."

Jones, the Baptist minister, responded the following week, writing he "resented the implication, or more accurately the accusation, that was made by Narconon's Mr. Duff. He accused me of supporting illegal drug use in our area if I did not swallow his program hook, line and sinker."

Bilger said he had been so optimistic about the promise of a revitalized Chilocco that last December he wrote Oklahoma health officials supporting Narconon.

But the mayor said his winter hope turned to disillusionment by spring when he learned of Narconon's history, and he came to believe he had been misled when Narconon held an emotional ceremony April 8 in which the Association for Better Living and Education presented a glowing study of Narconon and the \$200,000 check.

Later Bilger learned that ABLE shared a street address in Los Angeles with Narconon, and is identified in a Scientology magazine as part of Narconon.

"They totally misrepresented what was going on," Bilger said.

"I came away with the impression that we had an independent group here interested in mankind and they had researched the Narconon process. Then I find out ABLE and Narconon are part of the same organization," he said.

"I try to be straightforward, and when somebody doesn't do that, I wonder why."

In late June, Narconon's Smith used a copy of Bilger's December letter of support to suggest to The Associated Press that the mayor supported Narconon.

Bilger says the December letter no longer reflects his feelings.

"I imagine if I was in his shoes I'd use it, too," Bilger said. "I just think now it (Narconon) is a problem and if all the facts were out at the time, things might have been done differently."

The Chilocco Indian School closed in 1980 and was declared surplus property by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In January, the Oklahoma Health Planning Commission gave Narconon approval for an initial 75 beds. The group seeks 150 beds, with growth projected to 400.