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Local coalition addresses high-risk drinking

By David Unze • dunze@stcloudtimes.com • May 25, 2010

A newly formed coalition aimed at reducing high-risk drinking and its negative consequences meets tonight for the first time, and community stakeholders hope it launches a new era in cooperation.

St. Cloud Community Alliance has sprouted from efforts that began at St. Cloud State University, and a federal grant has allowed it to expand beyond campus. St. Cloud State President Earl H. Potter III and St. Cloud Mayor Dave Kleis lead the alliance.

Also present at tonight's meeting at St. Cloud Civic Center will be Tom Workman, a consultant hired with some of the \$300,000 federal grant that was awarded to St. Cloud State last summer by the U.S. Department of Education. Workman comes to St. Cloud as the City Council has been discussing several ordinances involving alcohol.

"I think the conversations around the new ordinances related to alcohol have spurred interest. People come up and say, 'This is important to me,'" Potter said. "And the coalition ... there's a place for your energy. I think the timing and the synchronicity is working in our favor."

Workman hopes alliance members seize that momentum, identify a vision for what they want their community to be and work together toward that ideal. Stakeholders include St. Cloud Hospitality Association, neighborhood groups, university students, staff and faculty and connections from campus to the city, he said.

"Coalitions only work, historically, when they work to build something rather than stand against something," said Workman, who has 12 years of experience in grant-funded health communication projects. He is an assistant professor at the University of Houston and Baylor College of Medicine.

Once the Alliance identifies what the community wants to be, the problems that stand in the way of getting to that vision quickly emerge, he said. With a variety of stakeholders providing input, there is a

shared goal without somebody always being the enemy, he said.

"The true key is that everybody has got to be there," Workman said. "Everybody has got to be a part of that because everybody has a stake."

Data shows success

In the past, groups have met and identified problems to fight, a tactic that can create enemies within the group.

"I think we've been using that mentality for a long time," said Robert Reff, interim assistant dean of students for chemical health and outreach programming at St. Cloud State University and an Alliance project director.

Reff points to new data that show St. Cloud State's education efforts are paying off.


The number of students who reported having five or more drinks at one sitting in the two weeks before the survey dropped to 39.4 this year, from 58.6 in 2005.

The percentage of students who didn't use alcohol in the 30 days before they were questioned increased to 30.1 percent this year from 22.6 percent in 2006.

The percentage of students who reported driving

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after five or more drinks in 30 days before they were surveyed dropped from 10.1 percent in 2006 to 3.8 percent this year.

The percentage of students who determined in advance not to exceed a certain number of drinks when drinking increased to 38.3 percent this year from 29.7 percent in 2006.

And the percentage of students who reported avoiding drinking games rose to 39.9 percent this year from 24.5 percent in 2006.

The hospitality association is looking forward to participating, said Harry Burns, the St. Cloud attorney who represents it.

"Anything that can promote conversation and goodwill is a good thing," he said.

The hospitality association wants to promote a safe and healthy environment and be a good neighbor, he said. Its members also want to operate their businesses without additional restraints or regulations, he said.

To that end, the hospitality group earlier this month passed a resolution that its members won't advertise or offer "all-you-can-drink" specials or drinking games where "the consumption of alcohol is a rule or a penalty of the game."

An ordinance regulating those promotions that the St. Cloud City Council is considering was described by Burns as "far-reaching and troublesome."

He cited recent changes that have impacted negatively on bar and restaurant businesses — .08 enforcement, the smoking ban and the economic downturn among them.

"It's a darn tough way to make a living," Burns said. "It's understandable that someone already having a tough time would get defensive about some of the proposals."

The self-policing provision of the resolution passed earlier this month contains no guarantees that it will prevent any bar owner from offering the drink specials, Burns acknowledged. But bar owners in the past have intervened when another owner has stepped out of line, he said.

The alliance looks like "a way everyone can win," Burns said.

More carrots

It comes out of the strong relationship the university and city have with Kleis and Potter in leadership, City Council member Bob Johnson said.

He hopes community stakeholders can participate in the alliance and that positive reinforcements can be included instead of just negative consequences. He cites the self-policing of bar owners that Burns mentioned as something that needs to be published and praised.

"A lot of us believe we need more carrots than sticks," Johnson said. "We need to identify more carrots."

He also believes the community needs to look at itself in a different way, that it's our city, our university and our children, not just things that belong to self.

"It's kind of an 'it takes a village approach,'" Johnson said. "Every citizen of the community should be able to grasp that part of it."

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Deb Middelstadt (from left), Heritage House Bed & Breakfast, talks about the St. Cloud State University neighborhood with Amy Haggerty, coordinator of alcohol prevention and community programming at SCSU; Robert Reff, interim assistant dean of students for chemical health and outreach programming at SCSU; and consultant Tom Workman. (Jason Wachter, jwachter@stcloudtimes.com)

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