

Parents: Keep Learning Center open

Homosassa Civic Club president claims ousted director spreading false rumors

By Mike Wright

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Natalie Zinsser doesn't want the Homosassa Learning Center to close.

Zinsser lives in Crystal River and home-schools her 9-year-old daughter Karen, who attends the center twice a month for Girl Scout meetings.

Zinsser organized a gathering of parents Thursday morning who protested the decision by the club's board of directors to remove learning center Director Joanne Bartell and change the locks.

"It's a wonderful resource for the community in all walks of life," Zinsser said. "Joanne Bartell does a wonderful job with the children."

While Zinsser organized the protest, Bartell's son Gary Bartell Jr. promoted it on his Facebook page to "protest closing of Learning Center."

However, according to civic club president Terry Green, the only person telling anyone the center is closing is Mrs. Bartell herself.

The civic club's directors voted in a December board meeting to fire Bartell and reject a proposed lease between the civic club and Homosassa Learning Center Inc.

Green and club directors said they did not want the building use agreement to go to the club's full membership for a vote, according to a recording of the meeting.

Bartell, who was appointed to the position by the late Jim Bitter, the former civic club president, says the board's decision is illegal because it cannot evict the learning center without a judge's order.

Green said the learning center is still open Monday through Wednesday and it will be open on more days once organizers have a better plan of action.

Green and his wife Kathy met in December with Homosassa Elementary School Principal Alice Harrell about setting up tutoring programs to meet the specific academic needs of students. The school is across the street from the learning center.

Zinsser said the membership should have had a vote on the lease. Zinsser said she joined the civic club in December so that she could vote for it.

Zinsser said the issue is keeping the learning center open for children and adults to have access to tutoring, computers and special classes.

"This isn't about Joanne," she said. "We're not trying to save Joanne's job."

Zinsser isn't the only non-Homosassa resident to be a member of the civic club. Voting membership is easy \$31 in annual dues and attendance at least one meeting a year.

Green said Mrs. Bartell had urged supporters — including members of a 4H club that had been meeting at the Learning Center — to join the civic club to garner support.

The club's board of directors met on Dec. 16 and decided to dismiss the lease proposal, oust Bartell and change the locks all without taking the matter to the full membership for a vote.

"You guys have got to kill this lease business. It can't come to any vote," an unidentified voice says in the recording.

Green said in an interview Thursday that longstanding members of the club had come to him asking that the board decide the lease without a membership vote. He said bylaws allow the board to hear complaints from members and decide whether to handle matters itself.

Green said the feud erupted when the learning center incorporated in May. Green, who was a member of the learning center committee, said the incorporation occurred without a committee vote and he didn't know about it until after it happened.

Civic club members said that matter should have come to them for approval since it separates the civic club, which owns the building, from operators of the learning center.

Mrs. Bartell has repeatedly said in interviews that Green has designs on the building for purposes other than the learning center. Green has denied that.

Green noted that Bartell never approached Harrell, the Homosassa Elementary principal, to coordinate programs with the school.

Bartell said she had done that with Harrell's predecessor, Chris Bosse, but not with Harrell, who became principal at the start of the 2015-16 school year.

"There was no reason to meet with her," Bartell said. "All our tutoring is set up individually with students. We talk with the teachers of those students."

Harrell said the only time she met Bartell was during the school's Christmas program on Dec. 16. She said Bartell apologized to her for the Greens' meeting with her a few days earlier, and also said the learning center programs may be ending.

"She had heard they were doing away with the tutoring," Harrell, daughter of school board member Ginger Bryant, said.

Harrell said she was pleased to meet with the Greens and would like to coordinate learning center tutoring programs to meet specific needs in areas of math and reading for her students, so long as the Citrus County School District administration approves.

Bartell said she is still pondering her options. She said she has hired Tampa attorney Luke Lirot, known in Homosassa for his work on behalf of the Freezer bar in a contentious zoning case about six years ago.

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