

Schools chief orders alderman out of building

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KINGSTON - An alderman promoting the formation of a Guardian Angels chapter in Kingston was forced to move a press conference out of the Kingston school district offices Friday following a confrontation with police, who were called to the scene by district Superintendent Gerard Gretzinger.

Two city police officers, who threatened to arrest Alderman Leonard Walker if he didn't "take it outside," broke up the conference, which had been blocking a doorway of the Cioni Administration Building at 61 Crown St. Another two officers remained stationed outside as Walker, D-Ward 3, resumed the news conference and called for Gretzinger to resign.

"He is not a man of true honor that can be trusted (or) a man of integrity, and at the same time he let a lot of stuff (fester) in the school system," Walker said.

He said the district's request for \$1,335 to provide copies of violent incident reports in city schools, at 25 cents per page as allowed by the state Freedom of Information Law, shows the superintendent is placing barriers to information.

"He wanted me to cancel this meeting today," Walker said. "I refused because I know that if I would have canceled this news conference, the bottom line (is Guardian Angels founder) Curtis Sliwa would not be coming up next week."

Gretzinger later acknowledged making the call to police, saying state Education Law prohibits use of school buildings without a permit. He said the parking lot of the administrative offices was offered as a courtesy to Walker, but could have been subject to the same restrictions.

Gretzinger said the incident reports, redacting information that would have identified students involved, were made available for viewing. He said the volume of the reports is due to broad state Department of Education reporting guidelines that loosely define violent incidents.

"It could be anything from somebody pushing somebody in the hall to a fight," he said.

"The reports have to be done by every single building in the district," Gretzinger said. "There are 14 buildings and over 8,000 students in the district, and anything which could be interpreted by state Education Law as being violent has to be included."

Among those joining Walker were four members of the Guardian Angels organization, former school board members Jolie Dunham and Jean Jacobs, and parent Rebekah Hedrick, whose son was a victim of an assault near Kingston High School last fall. That incident led to a protest organized by white supremacist and Internet radio host Hal Turner of New Jersey.

Two other district parents, Laurie and Barry Burnett, alleged a "coverup" by school officials concerning gang activity at the high school.

All of them say they support the formation of a Guardian Angels chapter to patrol Midtown, including the area around Kingston High School.

Gretzinger said steps have been taken to improve safety in district schools.

"We just last week added a school resource officer to Kingston High School," Gretzinger said. "We've worked very closely with our director of security in implementing new programs and workshops with people, and the number of referrals and superintendent hearings have decreased this year. We're making a lot of progress and we're working very closely with the staff and with the district to implement changes that we feel are very successful."

Walker, who also called for Mayor James Sottile to be replaced, said he plans to run for mayor in six years after retiring from his current job as a maintenance supervisor with the Anheuser Busch Co. in New Windsor.

"The mayor is a very good friend of mine, but if he's not going to work to reduce crime, reduce the taxes, and look at the way people are doing other things in different cities, yes, he should step aside," he said. "Maybe sometimes people are in office too long, too."

He voiced concern that the Guardian Angels were not immediately embraced by officials.

"The bottom line that bothers me is that a community that's afraid of change is going to be doomed to fail, and that's what I see Kingston doing," he said. "I see crime increasing. We're talking about violent crime up 18 percent."

Sottile, interviewed by telephone later, said Walker was simply "grandstanding" in advance of a planned meeting between the mayor, Gretzinger and Sliwa on Wednesday.

"Before I stand and slap somebody on the back and say we're going to allow you to come into the community and we want to partner with you, I need to know what they stand for," Sottile said. "I need to know what they do."

He denied a charge by Walker's supporters that police have been ordered not to discuss gang problems.

"That is a boldfaced lie," he said. "We have a gang unit where we have police officers that speak to signs that you watch for (with) your children with regard to gang activity. I promoted and supported those individuals going into the schools and speaking to the PTA."

The Guardian Angels, founded in New York City in 1979, train local residents to patrol neighborhoods and report criminal activity. Patrols are not armed.

Arnaldo Salinas, the senior director of the Guardian Angels, said the group would tour Kingston before recommending the formation of local patrols.

"We're here to supply solutions to problems," he said. "The reason we're successful is we don't take a reactionary motif to any problem. We don't work from the outside in. We work from the inside out. We're not mercenaries."