

Committee says PADS must seek permit

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The Park Ridge Procedures and Regulations Committee decided Tuesday that a controversial proposal to open a homeless shelter at St. Paul of the Cross School should require a special use permit. The question will advance to the full City Council on July 21.

The decision is a victory for a group of vocal parents at the school, who said they don't want a PADS shelter to open inside the parish's gymnasium this fall. Parent Paul Chelvin called the idea "unsafe and downright dangerous."

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"A homeless shelter in a school is a bad idea," he said. "The city must have a say."

Chelvin argued that there was no way to get an accurate background check on any of the homeless coming to the shelter because PADS does not fingerprint them: "If you don't fingerprint these folks, there is no way to ensure," he said.

The Rev. Carl Morello, pastor at St. Paul's and a member of the Park Ridge Ministerial Association which wants to open the shelter, said helping the homeless is part of the church's religious ministry and not subject to a special use permit. "To feed the hungry and give clothing to the naked and homes to the homeless is part of our ministry," he said. "The history of the organized church is service, not just to the privileged."

At one point, the discussion became quite contentious and several speakers accused Morello of trying to cut the community out of decision that could put their children in danger.

"I wonder if a special use permit was required when the bubble was being built over Park Ridge," Morello fired back.

But he was soon cut off by chairman Jim Allegretti, 4th Ward, who said he preferred to hear from the community rather than have a debate.

Morello then stormed out of the meeting and was unavailable for comment afterwards.

"I'm very disturbed he left," said Alderman David Schmidt, 1st Ward. "It gives the appearance that he does not care what the people think."

Schmidt said the PADS shelter should require a special use permit because PADS is a private entity setting up shop in a local facility. "This is not a religious matter," he said. "It is a civil matter. The church has to go through the process."