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Residents dislike Bible study ban

Most at hearing speak against UW-EC policy

Leader-Telegram Staff

ALTOONA — Most of the approximately 15 Chippewa Valley residents who spoke Monday night regarding UW-Eau Claire's Bible study ban were cut from the same cloth: They oppose the college's restrictions.

A public hearing at Altoona City Hall looked at the school's policy, which prohibits resident assistants from leading or organizing Bible study sessions in their dorm rooms or the residence hall where they have authority over other students.

About 55 people attended, along with Rep. Rob Kreibich, R-Eau Claire, Rep. Scott Suder, R-Abbotsford, Lance Steiger, the UW-Eau Claire senior RA who first challenged the rule this summer, and Mike Rindo, a college spokesman.

None of the residents who spoke at the two-hour meeting said they supported the university's policy, which also bans RAs from leading political activities or organizing sales parties in their dormitories.

Many of the speakers questioned the basis for the rule. "You can't make everyone in the dorms feel comfortable," said Colleen Russell, a UW-Eau Claire sophomore. "That's an unattainable goal."

In a letter to Steiger in July, Deborah Newman, associate director of housing and residence life, wrote that RAs could not lead Bible studies because their residents might feel "judged or pushed in a direction that does not work for them."

Eric Morken of Eau Claire argued that Christian teachings promote understanding and when followed properly make an individual

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"more approachable."

Like many of the attendees, he called for a resolution to the issue.

"Let's make a policy, get it in writing and get this resolved," Morken said.

At the start of the session, Kreibich told the crowd he would use their comments to "fashion a message to take back to Madison." On Dec. 13 a hearing at the state's capitol will further examine the UW-Eau Claire policy.

Kreibich and Suder oppose the rule.

On Nov. 14, UW-System President Kevin Reilly asked state Attorney General Peggy Lautenschlager to examine the legality of the policy. A week later, Lautenschlager's office announced that it would not weigh in on the matter.

In a letter to Reilly, Deputy Attorney General Daniel Bach wrote that it would be inappropriate for his office to issue an opinion on the rule because the attorney general represents the school in litigation cases.

Rindo said that UW-Eau Claire, along with the UW System, still is examining the rule. He added that the college hopes to have the issue resolved by the end of the school year.

Kreibich wants to see faster action on the part of the college. "We need a sense of urgency on this," he said. "It has to end because in the process Eau Claire is getting bashed."

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