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Citizens Confront Officials in Middletown

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Citizens Confront Government Officials at Middletown Town Council Meeting

Report by Melanie Shapiro, Co-founder of Citizens Against Trafficking

August 3, 2009

The parking lot was overflowing for the Middletown Town Council meeting on Monday evening. Dozens of citizens, including local business owners and parents, were there to express their concern about the presence of spa-brothels in the community and the loss of a children-centered business as a result. The Bulmers, owners of POW! Science! were in attendance.

Citizens Against Trafficking was there to ask the Town Council to support a state prostitution bill sponsored by Joanne Giannini. They realized that the municipality was limited to inspecting the spa-brothels for code violations and could do nothing more to prevent their operation in Middletown. They wanted the Town Council to pass a resolution supporting a state law against prostitution that will enable law enforcement to take action.

District politicians stood in the doorway to greet people as they arrived. Representative Deborah Ruggiero was there; she had voted in support of H5044A, which created a prostitution law and gave victims of trafficking immunity from prosecution. Senator Lou DiPalma was also there. He voted for a drastically different Senate bill (S 0596A) that further weakens the prostitution laws in Rhode Island by repealing all the anti-pimping laws in the criminal code and reduced the penalty for prostitution to a civil violation equivalent to a traffic ticket.

Senator DiPalma tried to reassure constituents that he was “working on it” and that he voted for a bill to “close the loophole.” Melanie Shapiro countered that assertion by pointing out the provisions of the Senate bill decriminalized pimping and created an impotent law against prostitution. Senator DiPalma responded by walking away.

Jenny Meyen, of Citizens Against Trafficking, testified as a mother of three children living in a town she says is a “small suburban with good people, where people know one another and look out for each other.” She became involved when she learned a favorite store of hers, POW! Science! was leaving Middletown because of the spa-brothel next door.

Meyen described the dangers to the community associated with the brothels and urged the Town Council to pass a formal resolution supporting Giannini’s House bill. She criticized the Senate bill in general and Senator DiPalma specifically for voting for it: “Why would a man who is a husband, father, neighbor, and former coach for children support legislation that weakens Rhode Island laws against prostitution and make it difficult to close brothels?”

Senator DiPalma responded by saying that “the issue was being addressed” in the General Assembly. He acknowledged that “the Senate bill does not go far enough.”

Jim Meyen then spoke on behalf of Businesses Against Brothels, a group working with Citizens Against Trafficking, that addresses the detrimental effect of brothels to Rhode Island businesses.

Citizens specifically asked the Town Council to write in support of the House prostitution bill. Several members said that they did want this in their community and it was important to pass a law that “closed the loophole.” They made no commitment to sending a letter in support of H 5044A.

Janice Knowles, a woman claiming to be the mother-in-law of the Lee Health Tuina Center operator, Mary Li Juan Dong, spoke in defense of the establishment. She said she was “shaking with anger” about the “slanderous accusations.” She said that none of the women lived on the premises and no illicit activity occurred there. She added that none of the women were allowed to wear skirts.

Since prostitution indoors is not against the law in Rhode Island, no one is accusing the Lee Health Tuina Center of breaking the law. Although Citizens Against Trafficking has reported on an Asian woman fleeing the Tuina Center and saying she was being forced to engage in sex acts. (See *Asian Woman Fled Middletown Brothel*)

Sex acts for a fee of \$60 and a tip are available at the Tuina Center. In January 2009, one man wrote:

Was heading down to Newport last night, so I thought I'd give Lee a try. I was there a year or so ago. First time I went I met Annie who was adorable and a real sweet heart. She gave a great massage and HE [means “Happy Ending,” a reference to masturbation] with lots of unlimited roaming [means free access to touch the woman] but not much else. I returned and had a better session with BJ [means fellatio] and top off. On my third trip it was F/S [means full service, which is sexual intercourse].

Janice Knowles claimed that the Tuina Center was a good business that had been serving the community for four years. Citizens Against Trafficking disagrees. We believe that prostitution is harmful to the individual involved and the community. Brothels are often connected to organized crime groups and attract other kinds of criminal activity. They set a poor standard for the community.