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Tarpon Springs Housing Authority had best intentions on Mango Circle playground

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Re: A desolate place to play April 19 story, and **Exposing kids to lead tops play area outrages** April 30 editorial

Playground managed with best intent

Facts concerning the Tarpon Springs Housing Authority and the Mango Circle playground:

On April 14, *St. Petersburg Times* staff writer Demorris Lee contacted me with questions about the safety of the Mango Circle playground. Based on the facts that the Housing Authority maintenance staff continually inspected and repaired the playground, that the playground had been found to be free of safety violations after inspection by HUD and the Real Estate Assessment Center (REAC) repeatedly throughout the years, and given that no child had ever been injured on the playground, I responded that the playground was safe.

The HUD/REAC inspector was due on-site for an inspection of all of our properties April 16-17. I invited Mr. Lee to come to Mango Circle to speak with the HUD/REAC inspector and observe his inspection of the playground. Mr. Lee declined that invitation. On April 17th the HUD/REAC Inspector inspected the playground and found no health and safety deficiencies.

With the intent of improving the playground until we could demolish and rebuild the site entirely, we contacted a nationally certified playground safety inspector to inspect the playground. Understanding that HUD/REAC and current playground safety standards could be quite different, I had hoped we could choose from the recommendations of the inspector those that would make the playground safer, more user-friendly and fun for the children while waiting to redevelop the site.

When the report came back from the playground inspector, that was not possible. On April 24th at a special meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Housing Authority, the above facts were discussed in detail. A vote was taken to remove the playground for the safety of the children.

In the past several years, HUD has severely limited our operating funding. We must prioritize use of our funds to the maintenance of the apartments so we are not forced to demolish them without a means to replace them. Therefore, the board decided not to replace the playground until we are notified of the success or denial of our application to the Florida Housing Finance Corporation for the redevelopment of the Mango site.

Despite the funding limitations, the Tarpons Springs Housing Authority has consistently been a high performing housing authority and scored in the top 10 percent of the nation's housing authorities when evaluated by HUD annually.

We were also honored to receive this past year a National Award of Excellence from the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, in which we were praised for our partnerships in making our community more livable for our lowest income citizens. Some of our efforts recognized were our Senior Home Rehabilitation Grant Program, where we rehabbed more than 60 seniors' homes in the community to insure that they could live comfortably and safely in their own homes.

In addition, with our Affordable Home Ownership Program we built and sold 30 homes in the neighborhood to low income families, making the American dream a reality for them. Both of these programs were funded by Pinellas County Community Development.

Also featured in the National Excellence Award was our "Cops and Kids Program," funded by the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board and run in partnership with the Tarpon Springs Police Department, YMCA of the Suncoast and Family Resources. This is an after-school and summer camp program serving 50 school-age children of Mango Circle and the surrounding neighborhood. It promotes school readiness and positive youth development. The program is within walking distance of Mango Circle and one of Tarpon Spring's nicest playgrounds, which the children use daily.

We acknowledge the focus on the playground. We have great plans for the future. We look forward to the continued partnerships and support we have had in the past to carry us successfully into our future.

Pat Weber, executive director, Tarpon Springs Housing Authority

Re: Debate over EMS response heats up after crash | April 29 story

Politics at play in fire departments

I think Seminole fire Chief Dan Graves and the "officials" you reference are outraged for the wrong reasons! This truly tragic accident has only brought to light something that we should all be outraged about — that Pinellas County appears to play politics with our lives and property on a regular basis.

Clearly, this is not a case wherein Pinellas Suncoast Fire Rescue Chief Rusty Livernois was trying to say that they could have saved these boys had they responded. To the contrary, your article says he specifically said that in this case, the lives were not viable. However, nobody knew that when they dispatched some of Seminole's units that are further away and that was the point I think he was undoubtedly trying to make.

I personally would like assurance that the closest unit will respond should I need them. Minutes can make a big difference in the outcome!

This accident was tragic and my heart goes out to the families, who suffered a loss beyond words, but as Chief Livernois suggested, it exposed a greater fundamental problem in our EMS and fire system: what appears to be political interference.

It is a no-brainer. The closest station should always be dispatched first and if the system is not properly set up to recognize what unit that is, that should be promptly addressed. To twist Chief Livernois' comments in this way is what I find disturbing and appalling!

Nicola Winder, Largo

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