

NEWS

Officials discuss turning Duval Elementary into youth center as part of gun violence prevention plan

John Henderson The Gainesville Sun

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Officials are discussing transforming Duval Elementary School into a cultural arts center for young people to keep them off the streets and possibly reduce gun violence that is on the rise in the city.

As violent crime increases in Gainesville, the police department has embarked upon numerous community initiatives to reverse the trend, police officials told the Gainesville City Commission on Monday in a special meeting.

Violent crime — including homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault — in Gainesville is up a total of 10.5 percent between 2020 and 2021, according to Uniform Crime Reporting statistics. It's a trend that is occurring throughout the country over the last year, police said.

Earlier this week, the department unveiled its programs to reduce gun violence — everything from gun buyback programs to strategic enforcement to creating a "neighborhood response council" to a social media campaign to remind people with guns to lock their cars.

"Gun violence is something that is a community issue," Gainesville Police Chief Tony Jones said. "If you are going to address gun violence, then you will have to do it in cooperation with the neighbors,"

At the meeting, Duncan-Walker said that after talking with young people in her district that includes East Gainesville she is convinced the city also needs to offer productive activities to keep young people busy.

She wants the city, in cooperation with other government agencies like Alachua County Public Schools, to use Duval Elementary School for a youth activity and cultural arts center. The school closed in 2016 but is currently being leased out to nonprofits that benefit students.

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Duncan-Walker said as someone who grew up in District 1, she is very familiar with gun violence. “I’ve seen more red and blue lights coming down Eighth Avenue than I’d like to see,” she said.

And she added that based on conversations she has had with the police chief, the perpetrators of gun violence are getting younger and younger.

She said she spoke with young people in her district about what the city should do.

“They said, ‘Commissioner, we need something to do. We need places to go,’ ” she said.

Duncan-Walker said they mentioned activities such as martial arts, chess, rugby, gymnastics, fitness, theater and other activities.

“Part of me was heartbroken to hear the list because it is so simple, because they are things that we have done in the past but somehow got away from them,” she said.

Duncan-Walker said she is scheduling town hall meetings in the coming months to get more input from young people and their families about the subject.

“I believe the adults have talked enough,” she said.

Duncan-Walker said she wants the commission to have a “sustained response” to the problem of gun violence, with American Rescue Plan Act funds possibly being used for programs.

Alachua County Public Schools Superintendent Carlee Simon said Wednesday that the discussions about using the school as a new community and cultural arts center are in the early conceptual stages, but she sees the potential.

She said the nonprofits that lease out space in the school could benefit from the project.

“We are very much interested in nurturing our relationships with our nonprofits, so my goal is to actually use this more as a pilot that we get to expand upon,” Simon said. “I know that one of the struggles that they have is having a facility available for them to do the work that they would like to do.”

She said the former Duval Elementary School is in an excellent location for the project, being "in the center of a community that has many children that could benefit from a youth center that focuses on enrichment and sport."

"We definitely know that when you have mentorship and support and activities, that keeps you engaged and allows you to have opportunities to expand your horizons," she said. "That helps with not only behavioral situations but it also will support academics as well."

Simon said she has been speaking with Commissioner Duncan-Walker about what a long-term collaboration might look like.

"We did have some very productive initial conversations," she said. "We are looking at an after-school program. We are very much interested in a cultural arts type of approach. We really are at the ideation stage of these discussions. But we are trying to have conversations with other individuals that we think would be interested in this effort."

The project offers a great opportunity to reel in private and public dollars, Simon said, noting that it would be appreciated if Alachua County participated in the project.

"There is quite a lot of land, so we have the school facility, but also the potential of providing other buildings on that campus to have more support, she said. "I really think we are talking about a big idea to support all community needs, obviously the community needs of students. But we also have community needs for people who are not in our K-12 system."

Simon said she could envision music and art programs being run out of the building.

"I see Black Box Theater. I see performing arts spaces. I also see spaces for galleries where we can really showcase work," she said. "There is a lot of potential. We want cultural arts, and we also want to engage. I see it as a learning area, a presenting area, a place where people want to participate and come together."