

SanTanSun News

OCT 20 - NOV 2, 2018 | www.SanTanSun.com

Relentlessly local coverage of Southern Chandler and our neighboring communities



Council shuts down controversial warehouse plans

BY JASON STONE
Staff

A large community outcry earlier this week stopped a controversial distribution center in Chandler.

The Chandler City Council listened to a packed City Hall audience wearing white on Monday, Oct. 15, and voted 5-2 to reject a planned development at McQueen and Queen Creek roads despite the threat of legal action from its own lawyer.

"This is a sweet win," said Susan Ellsworth, one of the leaders of a neighborhood group that formed to fight the project. "We worked hard. This brought our community together."

The developer, Ryan Companies, was attempting to build a 1.2-million-square-foot warehouse and distribution center



Councilman-elect Matt Orlando helped lead the petition drive against the proposed warehouse.

a little bit south of the southwest corner of the intersection. But a community movement that began less than a month ago helped snuff out the plans.

Despite warnings from City Attorney Kelly Schwab that the project met the city's zoning laws, council members listened to arguments for about two hours before rejecting it.

"As long as the developer met those requirements, the staff would be obligated to allow the development to go forward," City Attorney Kelly Schwab told the Council.

At issue were apparent changes to a 2007 plan called the Chandler Airpark Area Plan. Residents say the plans Ryan submitted looked nothing like the original

See **PROJECT** on page 12

31 teen suicides in 15 months fuels alarm here

BY JIM WALSH
Staff

Thirty-one East Valley teenagers have completed suicide in the past 15 months – including five since Aug. 30 – with the latest a 16-year-old Chandler boy who took his life last week.

The alarming trend has prompted parents, school administrators and teachers, youth outreach workers, a state legislator and the mayors of Gilbert and Chandler to mobilize the region and develop a strategy to combat a complicated issue with no easy answer.

The most recent deaths occurred in Queen Creek, east Mesa, Chandler and Gilbert with the youngest an 11-year-old boy.

Although the multi-city, multi-dimensional response to the heartbreaking trend is in an early stage, education consultant Katay McPherson believes she is making progress in developing the community-wide approach that she says is needed to deter teen suicide.

"Everyone needs to speak the same language and take action," McPherson

See **SUICIDES** on page 5



Kimberly Carillo/Staff Photographer

A fairy good time

Madilyn Budzyn, 7, left, and Taylor Baugh, 4, both of Chandler, concentrate on crafts during the Chandler Library's Fairy Tale Ball earlier this month. The event drew boys and girls and was built around the fact that fairy tales play a big role in a child's literacy development as well as provide entertainment and lessons on how to tell right from wrong. For more photos, see page 20.

Most Chandler public schools earn an 'A' from state

BY COLLEEN SPARKS
Managing Editor

Most campuses in the Chandler Unified School District are at the head of their class when it comes to the state's letter grades.

Across the district, 26 schools earned the letter grade "A" for the 2017-18

academic year under a system that requires the Arizona Department of Education, subject to the state Board of Education's final approval, to develop an achievement profile every year for every public school.

The letter grades must be based on an A through F scale with A being the highest. Of the other schools in the

Chandler district, 12 received B grades and four got Cs for the 2017-18 school year.

"The primary reason that we had significant improvement in letter grades is we had quite a few of our sites increase the growth that happened with students on campus on a yearly basis," Chandler

See **LETTERGRADES** on page 11

SUICIDES from page 1

said. "Mental health and wellness are an ongoing, progressive education. It's a constant conversation all year long."

McPherson has been building a coalition of allies to combat teen suicide – including Gilbert Mayor Jenn Daniels, Chandler Mayor-elect Kevin Hartke, state Rep. Jeff Weninger, R-Chandler – as well as community organizations focused on behavioral health issues in both municipalities.

The East Valley Behavioral Health Council in Gilbert and For Our City-Chandler have pledged their support. Gilbert Public Schools also is leading the new East Valley Prevention Collaborative, a network of East Valley school districts that will work together on deterring teen suicide.

Noticeably absent is a state-level suicide prevention coordinator. Though that position was created by the State Legislature in the final days of the 2018 session, it has yet to be filled. Suicide is the leading cause of death of Arizonans between the ages of 10 and 14 and the second leading cause of death for those 15-24.

Weninger said he supports more mandatory training for teachers to recognize the warning signs of teen suicide and child abuse.

He praised the Tempe Union High School District's recent groundbreaking training sessions to educate more than 800 employees on the warning signs of suicide and said he hopes it will serve as an example for other districts.

"It's serious, no matter who is doing it," Weninger said, explaining that his son knew the latest victim but hadn't seen him recently. "We need to move as a society, as a community."

The recent cluster of suicides has struck fear and frustration in some parents.

One Chandler parent posted on Facebook recently:

"Think for a second if these precious kiddos had been murdered and the outrage."

McPherson briefed the Behavioral Health Council, formed by the Gilbert mayor's office, last week. For Our City-Chandler, a social service organization, will hold a panel discussion on teen suicide at a breakfast meeting Nov. 1 at the East Valley Jewish Community Center, 908 N. Alma School Road.

"I think we have a good path forward," McPherson said. "It's a good first step in the right direction."

McPherson envisions a coalition of schools, city governments, law enforcement agencies and faith-based organizations working collaboratively to deliver the same message about emotional wellness and teaching parents and other adults how to recognize the warning signs of suicidal ideation.

"My mission is prevention and making parents and students aware of how insidious and cryptic the warning signs can be," she said.

With the East Valley on pace to lose one student every two weeks – as was the case last year – awareness alone is not an adequate response, McPherson said.

Nikki Kontz, clinical director for Teen Lifeline, said it's important not to lose perspective on the teen suicide problem.

Even though it might seem bleak with a series of teens taking their lives, there also has been significant progress, she said.

She said teen suicide was not even discussed when she started as a volunteer at



Chandler education consultant Katie McPherson is organizing a collaborative, broad-range effort to stem the tide of teen suicides in the East Valley.

Teen Lifeline as a teenager 24 years ago, after a friend completed suicide.

EV a hot spot for calls

"We need to look at how far we have come. We have come a long way," Kontz said. "In the last 10 years in the East Valley, we are making headway, it just takes time. We can tell you that lives have been saved."

Kontz said about one-third of Teen Lifeline's calls statewide come from the East Valley, where several school districts have been part of a statewide trend to list the hotline's number on students' identification badges. She said 140 school districts are now listing the number, 602-248-8336.

"We don't give advice. Our teen volunteers are there to build coping skills and resiliency," Kontz said. "Our message is all about life, celebrating life and teaching resiliency."

She said suicide might seem impulsive, but it is usually not about one setback in someone's life and more about an accumulation of issues that leaves someone in a dark place.

"It's about helping them find hope and find other options, so that suicide is not the only option," Kontz said. "There are reasons for living."



Gilbert Mayor Jenn Daniels has thrown her efforts into planning a region-wide approach to help reduce the alarming increase in East Valley teen suicides.

Kontz espouses prevention and awareness. The cluster of suicides has furthered that cause by capturing the attention of many community organizations in the East Valley, with the human loss growing impossible to ignore.

In response to the suicide cluster, the

Chandler Coalition for Youth and Substance Abuse, which has mainly focused on drug abuse and addiction prevention, is adding teen suicide to its list of priorities, realizing that they are all symptoms of psychological issues.

"We want to hit the suicide prevention head-on and empower the community to focus on positive mental health," said Ted Huntington, community programs manager for the coalition and Chandler iCAN: Positive Programs for Youth. "Mental health and substance abuse are so connected."

A former Mesa homicide detective, Huntington responded to countless teen suicides during his career and dreaded the job of informing grieving parents and relatives that someone had taken their own life.

"It's so easy to be influenced by something spontaneous," Huntington said. "If there had been a pause, they probably would not have pulled the trigger."

"The opportunity is that we can come together as a community and turn the tide on this, focusing on hope and compassion for each other," Huntington said.

Social media looms large

Daniels, who, like McPherson, has four children, noted that this is the first generation that does not know what life was like before electronic devices, such as smart phones.

She said social isolation – caused by excessive use of cell phones, social media and video games – is a contributing factor. She said some teens tend to hide behind their electronic screens and avoid human interaction.

"It was concerning to all the community. This is definitely something that is becoming an epidemic. For me, what it boils down to is a lack of human connection," Daniels said.

She said teenagers need to be told that they are loved and that their lives have a purpose.

"We're going to show these kids that they matter," she said.

Susan Cadena, prevention coordinator for Gilbert Public Schools, said that educators are alarmed by the rash of teen suicides and that the prevention collaborative will give them an opportunity to develop a strategy that can be used throughout the region.

Cadena has invited school officials from a variety of school districts – including Mesa, Chandler, the Tempe Union High School, Kyrene, Higley, Queen Creek,

Apache Junction and JO Combs – to the collaborative's first meeting in November.

The benefits of a regional approach become clear through McPherson's statistics. She said the students who ended their own lives attended schools in the Mesa, Gilbert, Queen Creek, Higley, JO Combs and Tempe Union High School districts.

"It's not just a school district issue. It's a community issue, it's a life issue," Cadena said. "Ultimately, we want to build a strong, comprehensive support system for our district and our families."

She said the key is to focus on emotional wellness, even in small children.

Cadena said children need to develop emotional resilience, learning to develop coping skills from the everyday setbacks that most people experience at one time or another.

Learning experiences should develop self-esteem and a sense of identity from "productive struggle" – which might mean failure in a variety of ways, such as flunking a test, striking out in a baseball game, or a setback in a relationship, she said.

"We should be alarmed. Why are kids seeing that (suicide) as an option," Cadena said. "We have kids as young as second



Many school districts in the East valley have put the Teen Lifeline number on student ID badges in one effort to remind students they are not alone when they hit a rough patch.

or third grade who don't want to be here anymore."

Kyrene school officials in various middle schools, for example, more than once have had to intervene when a child talked of self-harm.

Everyone involved in the teen suicide prevention movement knows the stakes are life and death, even though there is no one solution to eliminate it.

The importance of their mission was expressed eloquently by the anguished cry of a shocked Queen Creek mother in a social media post after her son committed suicide.

"He had a kind soul and a quick wit. He was the kind of kid everybody liked," the mother wrote about her son.

"He never said...anything like I hate you mom and dad or I hate my life. I don't think he knew how many lives he touched. He will be truly missed. Please hug your kids. Please talk to your kids. We don't want anyone else to ever go through anything like this again."

Lamented a Queen Creek mom: "Before I buy clothes for my 12-year-old's first dance, I am buying him res clothes for a classmate's funeral who committed suicide this week. This is happening way too young and too often. I beg you to talk to your kids, let them know you are there." ■