

SURVEY

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“We only have pocket parks,” said Matusick, who lives in the southwest quadrant.

The NRC’s report on their geographic comparisons noted a possible 20-percent margin of error in comparing quadrants, due to the small sample sizes. Due to this margin, “differences in ratings among areas should be interpreted cautiously,” the report said.

Overall, participants rated DeLand above average in social events, cultural arts, and for its vibrant Downtown; but below average in K-12 education and citizens’ overall feeling of safety.

The reports of feeling unsafe, however, is in sharp contrast to survey respondents’ generally high marks for the DeLand Police Department.

“There’s always room for improvement,” Graham said. “But it was certainly interesting to see the community have a good outlook on the Police Department.”

The contrast in feelings of safety and the outlook on the DPD was not the only point of apparent contradiction: Respondents rated DeLand below average in regard to drinking water, despite DeLand having won awards for water quality.

The survey did not specify if it was asking about water quality or water pricing. Several members of the City Commission questioned which one respondents were referencing in their answers.

“This is a good start, but I think if we really want to use this ... to make a difference,” Vice Mayor Matusick said, “I think we need a little more info instead of guessing what they meant.”

It was suggested that, in the future, a blend of the two survey styles — Stetson University and the national group — would give the city better insight.

“Working with Stetson to drill down a little bit more,” City Manager Michael Pleus said.

Of the 1,500 residents sent the survey, 344 chose to respond. The 24-percent response rate was higher than the national average. The answers of respondents were weighted to reflect the age, gender, and race demographics of the DeLand area, in an effort to create a more comprehensive picture of the city.

The overall data were also blended with responses from the online opt-in survey, which 264 citizens completed.

“In doing so, it provided for a more accurate survey, with only a 5-percent margin of error,” said Graham.

Cities participating in the National Citizen Survey are able to add, exclude, or adjust questions to suit their area’s needs. For example, questions about snow removal were excluded from the DeLand Citizen Survey, said Graham.

“I think, holistically, this was a good approach,” Mayor Bob Apgar said. “As we go forward, we do want to find a way to use both approaches.”

City commissioners will use the survey results when they meet for a strategic-planning and goal-setting workshop at 8:30 a.m. Saturday, March 4, at DeLand City Hall.

View the complete survey results at www.deland.org/pages/citizensurvey.

BY ERIKA WEBB

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A common goal among parents of children with autism is helping the child reach his or her full potential.

The PLAY Project — designed to be affordable and practical — can help.

PLAY was developed by Dr. Richard Solomon, a pediatrician, because of the lack of early-intervention programs for children with autism.

PLAY is often used to supplement special education, language and occupational therapies, and other therapies, such as Applied Behavior Analysis.

Kim Rust is a licensed clinical social worker whose office is in Downtown DeLand.

When her son was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, Rust searched for a way to connect with him.

“One of the biggest challenges for these kids on the autism spectrum is they can get stuck in their own world,” Rust said. “We call it their comfort zone. They’ll continuously spin wheels, watch YouTube. It’s hard to get them to play with you.”

An inability to connect with others is a core symptom of autism-spectrum disorder.

“The principles, methods and techniques of the PLAY Project emphasize the child’s readiness, or following the child’s lead, as a means for improving social skills,” according to a website that explains the therapy.



PHOTO COURTESY KIM RUST

Playtime — Kim Rust and her son, Quinn, blow bubbles together. Quinn, who is in Volusia County Schools’ gifted-student program, was diagnosed with a disorder on the autism spectrum. Kim Rust became interested in the challenges children like Quinn face, and became certified as a home consultant in PLAY Project therapy, which is designed to teach parents how to interact with their children who have autism.

Rust was so impressed with the results of using PLAY that, in 2014, she trained in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to become a certified home consultant.

“What I love about it is, it’s really empowering for the families, because I help teach the family how to play with the child in a way that helps them connect joyfully,” she said.

People with autism can be easily overwhelmed by sensory input, so parents, caregivers and siblings must learn particular ways of engaging them.

“You have to make them want

to play with you, to become motivated because it’s fun,” Rust said. “Then they realize you’re more fun than what they were doing.”

She said PLAY can help children from 18 months to 10 years old, typically, to achieve more as they move into adolescence and beyond.

One element of the program is the idea that children go through a series of developmental levels. PLAY is designed to guide them through each level.

“If they don’t learn the early ones, they can’t acquire the more advanced skills,” she explained.

“Our brains are more changeable when we’re young.”

But connection is the key.

“To learn how to share attention with someone else is fundamental; it lays the foundation for all social and emotional development,” Rust said. “You can’t have a conversation with another adult unless you learn to engage.”

She added, “If you don’t know how to sit and look someone in the eye, you’re not going to be able to hold a job.”

Rust’s son is ready to turn 6. He attends a public elementary school and is in the gifted program.

Volusia parents of children with autism plan federal complaint against school system

BY ERIKA WEBB

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Members of at least 11 Volusia County families of children with autism are preparing to sue, alleging that the school system discriminates against children with disabilities, especially those with autism.

Dr. Katie Kelly, who heads the Children’s Rights Unit for Community Legal Services of Mid Florida, is drafting a complaint to be filed with the U.S. Department of Justice against eight Volusia County schools.

At issue, according to Kelly and one of the parents involved, are a variety of concerns about the treatment of the students, including arrests and inappropriate placements in classrooms with children who have delinquency problems but not neurological disorders.

Kelly told of the experience of one 9-year-old student who was struggling to cope in the classroom.

“On Monday, he was Baker Acted, and

the hospital sent him home,” Kelly said. “He was Baker Acted the next day, Tuesday, and Halifax [Health Medical Center] Behavioral Center sent him home. On Wednesday, they didn’t even bother to send him to Halifax Behavioral Services, just arrested him, all for disability-related behavior.”

Children with autism are not a threat to themselves or others, Kelly said. They are expressing a manifestation of their condition, autism. Without interference, she said, these students will calm down.

“But it’s been my experience: Those meltdowns lead to arrest,” Kelly said.

As of Feb. 21, the complaint was not complete, Kelly said, because complaints from families of children with autism keep coming. Each must be vetted and then added to the document.

“The public schools are supposed to be part of the solution; they are not supposed to be adding to the problem,” Kelly said. “They get a lot of money to help fix these

Autism training

As the Florida Legislature prepares to convene Tuesday, March 7, for its 2017 session, legislators are considering Senate Bill 154, filed by Sen. Perry Thurston, D-Fort Lauderdale, and its companion bill, House Bill 39, that would require the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to set up a program to train officers to work with people with autism-spectrum disorders.

behaviors, not punish them.”

The school district had no comment on the pending lawsuit.

“The district cannot comment on any student specific matter or threats of litigation,” Volusia County Schools spokeswoman Nancy Wait said in an email. “When we are presented with complaints, we promptly review them. If we receive a new complaint from attorney Kelly, we will review it at that time.”

On the road again Neighborhood Center puts wheels on a family’s journey from homelessness

“They were very surprised; all of us cried. They were speechless; it seemed as though they were in shock. It was a beautiful moment.”

— Waylan Niece of The Neighborhood Center

BY A. JANELL WILLIAMS

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A Christmas gift from The Neighborhood Center of West Volusia changed the lives of one area family this year.

Jerry and Erika Cooper were shocked when members of The Neighborhood Center’s housing staff surprised them with a 2004 Chevy Malibu that had been donated to the agency in November.

After a setback that left them homeless, the Coopers were working to put their family back on its feet via bus and bicycle.

The center also assisted with reinstating Jerry Cooper’s driver’s license.

The car will help Erika Cooper get to and from her job at Porky’s BBQ, and Jerry

Cooper to his job at Atlantic Septic, installing drain seals.

They’ll also be able to get their two children, Hunter, 2, and Alena, 3, to and from child care.

“It has been an inspiration to keep us moving forward, to keep improving,” Erika Cooper said.

The Neighborhood Center has been helping the family since September 2015.

“We were living in a tent when they accepted us,” Erika Cooper said.

The family first stayed in The Neighborhood Center’s emergency shelter, then soon moved to transitional housing, which is an option the center provides for families



PHOTO COURTESY THE NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

A life-changing gift — Erika and Jerry Cooper and their children, Hunter, 2, and Alena, 3, celebrate their new 2004 Chevy Malibu, a Christmas gift from the staff of The Neighborhood Center. The center has been helping the family out since September 2015. The car will help the parents get to work and back, as well as get the kids to child care.

Please see **FAMILY, 10A**