Chamber resumes town hall meetings

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PALM CITY — The Palm City Chamber of Commerce is resuming its town hall meetings.

"I'm happy with them," Niki Norton, president of the chamber, said. "I think we had a really good public turnout."

At the upcoming meeting — Wednesday, Sept. 24, 6 to 8 p.m. — the chamber will have speakers who will explain the ongoing widening of Martin Highway. The meeting will be at the Palm City Community Center, 2701 S.W. Cornell Ave., Charlie Leighton Park.

Norton said the road expansion is important for numerous reasons. "It's affecting the pathway through Palm City," she said.

Norton said the chamber is trying to get speakers for this or future town halls to discuss the proposed Costco that, if built, would be on 28 acres nestled between Martin Highway, High Meadow Avenue and the Ronald Reagan Turnpike. Additionally, Norton said, the chamber is trying to get speakers to discuss the proposed 1 cent local-option sales tax voters will decide in November, the controversial proposed high-speed passenger rail All Aboard Florida, and other important topics.

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Tech skills pay off for Palm City youth

Photo by Patrick McCallister

Palm City’s Mahdi Hussein heads to class and work at Citrus Grove Elementary School. The Martin County High School Student is in the Students Supporting Schools, S3, program. In addition to getting class credit for helping teachers set up computers and related technology, he’s a paid Martin County School District employee.

Administrators find novel solution to schools’ IT needs

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PALM CITY — Mahdi Hussein jumps into his car and drives to his first class at Citrus Grove Elementary School. "At first, it was a little awkward," the 16-year-old said.

Mahdi is one of four high school students the district hired over the summer to provide basic tech support at elementary schools. Yes, hired. Mahdi is a junior at Martin County High School, but he’s getting paid and getting class credit to help teachers at Citrus Grove use new technology. He’s in the Students Supporting Schools program. Mahdi spends a few hours a week as a district employee — with a badge, direct deposit

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ing tax dollars. "We had them come before us, before the board, and we visited with them," Pilenzo said. "We've done due diligence."

Former county commission candidate Barbara Clowdus said it's unlikely there'll be any organized efforts to oppose re-authorization of the council.

"Who wants to oppose children?" she said.

Wentley said the Children’s Services Council of Martin County helps fund 35 programs run by 20 not-for-profit organizations, including Palm City’s Tykes & Teens. This fiscal year, it set its tax rate at about 37 cents for every $1,000 of assessed, non-exempt property value. Its proposed rate for 2014-2015 is closer to 36 cents, because property values are increasing. About 91 percent of raised funds go to programs. In the 2012-2013 fiscal year, council funded programs served about 11,500 children, and 3,130 adults with prenatal and parenting training services.

The council doesn’t run any of its own programs. Wentley said she’s talking to groups ahead of the November re-authorization vote. She urges those who want presentations to call the council.

To learn more about the council, call its office at (772) 288-5758, or visit wwwcscmc.org.

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and all. He’s paid minimum wage.

“I usually get Level 1 (requests for help), where I work directly with the teacher," Mahdi said. The S3 students are a big help for the district, Katie Preston, director of educational technology, said. She said as schools were getting more computers and related systems, the support staff was getting overwhelmed.

"Prior to this program, I had six people supporting over 12,000 devices," she said. "Think about it."

Preston said last school year many were trying to figure out how to get more tech support into classrooms without asking the cash-stressed district to hire more employees.

"We tried to come up with a plan for how we can beef up that tech support, and said, ‘Why don’t we use students?’" she said. "Many of the high school students have a better understanding of technology than anybody. They were born with it. They love it. They’re comfortable with it."

And students would work much less expensively than others, because they’re also getting class credit and job training to put on their resumes. Mark C. Malham, coordinator of career technical education and curriculum, said the schools advertised the tech-support jobs to students and put applicants through the district’s rigorous hiring process. But, they’re nonetheless still students getting evaluated and taught about things such as showing up on time, wearing appropriate clothing, maintaining professional conversations, and listening to customers — the so-called “soft skills” employers prize.

“A lot of the (tech-support) employees are weak on soft skills,” he said. "So we’re going to be working on their soft skills."

Mahdi attended Crystal Lake and Palm City elementary schools, and is running into some of his former teachers at Citrus Grove. He uses the word “awkward” a lot. But he said he’s getting used to wearing the same employee badge and going to the same break room as his former teachers. He’s aiming to go into software development, and said his first real job is giving him ideas for education applications.

“(Youths) know informational technology, but we don’t have real world experience,” he said. Mahdi said S3 is changing that for him.

“It’s not book knowledge," he said. “It’s real world knowledge."