

## Beaufort Co. after-school program may be forced to relocate third site in two years

FEBRUARY 11, 2020 03:52 PM

**BY RACHEL JONES**

An after-school program that serves low-income students in Beaufort County is once again facing the possibility that it might have to move one of its locations.

Neighborhood Outreach Connection's Simmons Cay program, which operates out of a three-bedroom, 1,500-square-foot apartment at The Onyx in Bluffton, was found last month to be in violation of county zoning ordinance and fire and building safety codes, according to interviews with county officials and emails obtained by The Island Packet and The Beaufort Gazette.



On Tuesday, county community development director Eric Greenway said the program will either have to move out of the building altogether or begin a complex zoning amendment process that requires property owner approval, three County Council readings, design work and construction to turn the apartment into a “place of assembly.”

It is the latest in a series of challenges for NOC, an after-school tutoring program with seven sites in Bluffton, Beaufort and Hilton Head Island, that up until the past two years has operated solely out of apartment complexes across the county.

In recent months, the program has lost a nearly \$1 million federal grant because of zoning and safety issues, was evicted from an apartment complex on Hilton Head because of a property owners association decision and was forced to temporarily close The Onyx site because of staffing issues. Two years ago, the program was ousted from its Cordillo Courts Villas location on Hilton Head and has since relocated to St. Luke's Church.

On Monday, Narendra Sharma, NOC's founder and chairman of its board of directors, said discussions with the county are ongoing and there are no plans to move students.

State Sen. Tom Davis and Beaufort County Council chairman Stu Rodman have been helping Sharma find a solution so the program can have its federal grant reinstated, according to emails obtained by the newspapers.

Sharma said Monday the county had not yet notified NOC about the violations.

However, he was included as a recipient in several emails from county employees in January that clearly stated the county's position.

A Jan. 15 email from Greenway to then-county attorney Tom Keaveney said the Onyx apartment complex is not zoned for educational use and that "no zoning permits may be issued for the approval of this use."

On Jan. 16, Sharma forwarded that email to the South Carolina Department of Education, which handles the federal grant.

On Jan. 29, county administrator Ashley Jacobs emailed Rodman saying, "The way to resolve this dilemma is for Dr. Sharma to find a location that meets the requirements of the law. The law is the law."

As of Tuesday, NOC signage was still posted outside of an apartment at The Onyx. On Feb. 2, NOC posted a Facebook update that began "ONYX (Simmons Cay) Center in Bluffton Flourishing," and detailed the past six months at the site.



When asked Monday if he believed NOC was operating illegally at the Onyx, Sharma said “from my standpoint, the ordinance in place is relatively antiquated.”

“There are a lot of these things that can be examined in a different way, and I’m trying to get confirmation from the county that we can find a solution,” he said. “... These kids are here for an hour and a half each day, four days a week. It’s not a commercial use.”

The Onyx site, which was established in 2014, [closed for over a month last year](#) after Sharma fired the site’s program director and a community liaison, according to previous reporting by the Packet and the Gazette.

Both women said they had been fired for asking Sharma to show them more respect and to be more transparent about how a \$10,000 grant from 100+ Women Who Care Greater Bluffton was being used. Sharma denied that he had ever been disrespectful to the women and said he had no issues with transparency.

On Monday, Sharma said he is not looking for another site for The Onyx’s program, adding that “we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

The county has not cited NOC for the violations, according to Greenway.

When asked Tuesday what the next step in the process is, Greenway said the county is investigating the issue and could not comment specifically on what will happen with NOC.

## **LOCATION PROBLEMS**

The program’s location in apartment buildings is intended to ease transportation for students, according to Sharma.

However, the lack of educational facility zoning at three NOC sites — Marsh Pointe and Parkview in Beaufort and the Onyx in Bluffton — resulted in the program losing a nearly \$1 million federal grant in September.

NOC was awarded the grant in 2018, and received \$251,591 from it in 2018-19. According to Sharma, the grant funds half the budgets at NOC’s Marsh Pointe and Parkview sites in Beaufort and the Onyx site in Bluffton.

Unrelated to the grant, NOC has had to move students from both its Hilton Head sites after property owners associations evicted them.

Nearly two years ago, the program was [kicked out of Hilton Head's Cordillo Courts Villas](#) following a lawsuit filed by NOC against the Villas that ended in a settlement. In May 2018, the program moved from Cordillo Courts to nearby St. Luke's Church.

On Dec. 30, NOC was told by the Oaks board of directors that students who did not live at the Oaks would no longer be allowed to attend that NOC site starting in January, according to a press release on NOC's website.

“The Oaks Board's action was heartless and a significant blow to the children and families affected,” the release read. “The Oaks Board of Directors is now controlled by a small group of investors who support short term rentals (mainly Airbnb).”

Students who don't live at The Oaks are now getting tutored by NOC at Island Lutheran Church, Sharma said. According to Jim Neubauer, a member of The Oaks' property owners association board, the NOC must leave The Oaks entirely by May 2020.

Sharma said Monday that discussions with The Oaks were ongoing and declined to comment further.

According to fire chief Brad Tadlock with the Town of Hilton Head Fire Rescue, NOC's Hilton Head church sites have not yet been inspected or deemed fit for the students to be there.

He said the department has previously worked with NOC and “they were up to code” at Cordillo Courts and The Oaks.

Tadlock said that they department will conduct a “very routine” inspection of the Island Lutheran and St. Luke's Church sites once they receive confirmation that NOC is operating there. Because the organization doesn't have a business license, he said, “They either let us know (their new location) or we find out they're there and follow up.”

“It's not ‘investigating’ because they've done anything wrong,” he said. “But if they're operating there, we have a responsibility to inspect it, to make sure the kids are safe.”

