



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Shanna Cooksey and her daughter Brooklyn, of Colby, enjoyed a recent dip in the Colby Swimming Pool. With temperatures near 100, the pool may be the place to go cool off.

Group brings tension to town

SMITH CENTER (AP) — Supporters of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi see his Transcendental Meditation movement as fostering world harmony. But in this farm town in the heart of the heartland, the movement's plans to build its "World Capital of Peace" here are creating more tension than tranquility.

Folks became alarmed when the outsiders bought up large tracts of land. Nine local pastors warned the movement that it is encroaching on their spiritual turf. And when a TM representative started throwing around terms at a meeting like "waves of coherence" and "silent zero point," the farmers just shook their heads.

"It hasn't split the community, but it has caused a lot of tension," said Mayor Randy Archer. "We're an older community, and new things that come to town are scary for some people."

The TM movement — whose founder, the Maharishi, was the Beatles' guru — has announced plans to spend \$15 million to build a dozen marble "peace palaces" facing east in Smith County. Because TM's practitioners want to disperse "waves of coherence" as widely as possible to influence others, they chose a spot just 10 miles west of the geographic center of the Lower 48 states.

Eric Michener, who works as project coordinator out of a storefront office on Main Street, conceded his group, the nonprofit

Maharishi-affiliated Global Country of World Peace, probably could have made a better first impression.

"I don't think we've run into this vibrant level of misunderstanding before," he said.

Altogether, the Maharishi wants to build 2,400 peace palaces in 250 U.S. cities and has opened ones in Houston, Bethesda, Md., Lexington, Ky., and Fairfield, Iowa, where his group also has operated Maharishi University of Management for three decades.

In Smith County, initial plans call for about 300 people to live in the two-story palaces, but that could increase to 2,000 over the next three years, said Kent Boyum, the group's director of governmental affairs. He said the palaces also could be open to tourists. Work is expected to begin this summer and be completed by year's end.

TM traces its roots to India. The movement began in the 1950s and is best known for its celebrity disciples, who have included Clint Eastwood and the comedian Andy Kaufman. Practitioners repeat a thought — a mantra — over and over to achieve relaxation, typically for 15 or 20 minutes every morning and evening.

Supporters say that TM is a technique, not a religion — that people can meditate and still be of any faith they want.

But the Rev. Greg Hubbard of the Evangelical Free Church, countered, "They say they aren't a religion, and I say baloney." In April,

he and other pastors signed a letter to the local newspaper saying: "They are welcome, but they must understand we are competing for the eternal souls of people."

Hubbard said freedom of religion or the right to own property aren't issues here. "The thing that bothers us is what we perceive to be their blatant dishonesty about who they are. The bottom line is, dishonest neighbors aren't good neighbors," he said.

Others in Smith Center — a dwindling town of 1,800 with an aging population — are withholding judgment.

"I'm not for them. I'm not against them. You've got to wait and see," the mayor said. "If it helps the community, that'll be great, and I hope it does help the community."

Boyum held out the possibility of an economic boost for the town, where folks raise wheat, corn, soybeans and cattle about 175 miles from Topeka, near the Nebraska line: "Our intention is to funnel as much finances and work through the local community as we can. We all are consumers and will bring resources into the county."

The Global Country of World Peace bought about 1,100 acres this spring to build the palaces and farm organic produce. Because land is prized here above just about everything except family and faith, people sat up and took notice.

"They came in and, boom, here we are," the mayor said. "People thought they were sneaking in."

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