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By Denise Watson Batts

NSU calls for unity after tensions over Afr'Am Fest

Let's put the past behind us and work together to better Norfolk State University. That was the overriding message at a Monday night meeting between college officials and residents of its surrounding neighborhoods.

Norfolk State President Carolyn Meyers called the town hall meeting on campus to smooth over recent complaints from civic leagues that the university did not include them enough in its planning to possibly host Afr'Am Fest, a popular cultural event. Meyers announced on Feb. 6 that the university would not host the event after the public outcry and concerns about noise, security and parking.

Meyers said Monday's meeting would be the first of several to open up dialogue. She hopes to have another in April and will allow the civic leagues to set the agenda.

"We want to be good neighbors," Meyers said in her opening. "To be good neighbors, we have to learn about one another."

Meyers and her staff spent most of the evening telling the crowd of about 60 residents and students about the school's goals and challenges.



Middle town resident Selma Howard listens as the president of NSU explains the overview of the university during a neighbors meeting on the school's campus in Norfolk on Monday. (Hyunsoo Leo Kim | The Virginian-Pilot)

University leaders want to increase enrollment and strengthen programming, but the school is suffering, like other state institutions, from budget cuts.

She encouraged residents to visit campus, to mingle with students and to attend student productions, concerts and games.

Several residents stood to speak. All thanked the university for organizing the meeting. Some complained about overflow parking during

football games and questioned plans for campus parking as the university is undergoing new construction. Meyers said she'd love to have parking decks but there is no funding for them; she said that parking is an issue the university will continue to study.



NSU cabinet members turn to listen to Tara Walker, far right, a Middle town resident during a meeting with neighbors at the Spartan Suites on the campus in Norfolk on Monday. (Hyunsoo Leo Kim | The Virginian-Pilot)

Other suggestions included the college sponsoring more activities for children at a neighborhood recreation center, perhaps getting student athletes to work with children.

A couple of residents spoke up for hosting more community events, such as Afr'Am. They see parking in their neighborhoods as a sign of the institution's growth and popularity.

The world is changing, said Mary Clayton, a Norfolk State student and nearby resident, and "with changes you are going to have some unrest. We can't just sit back and say we don't want anybody parking in front of our house or walking across our lawns. We have to stop complaining."

*Denise Watson Batts, (757) 446-2504
denise.batts@pilotonline.com*