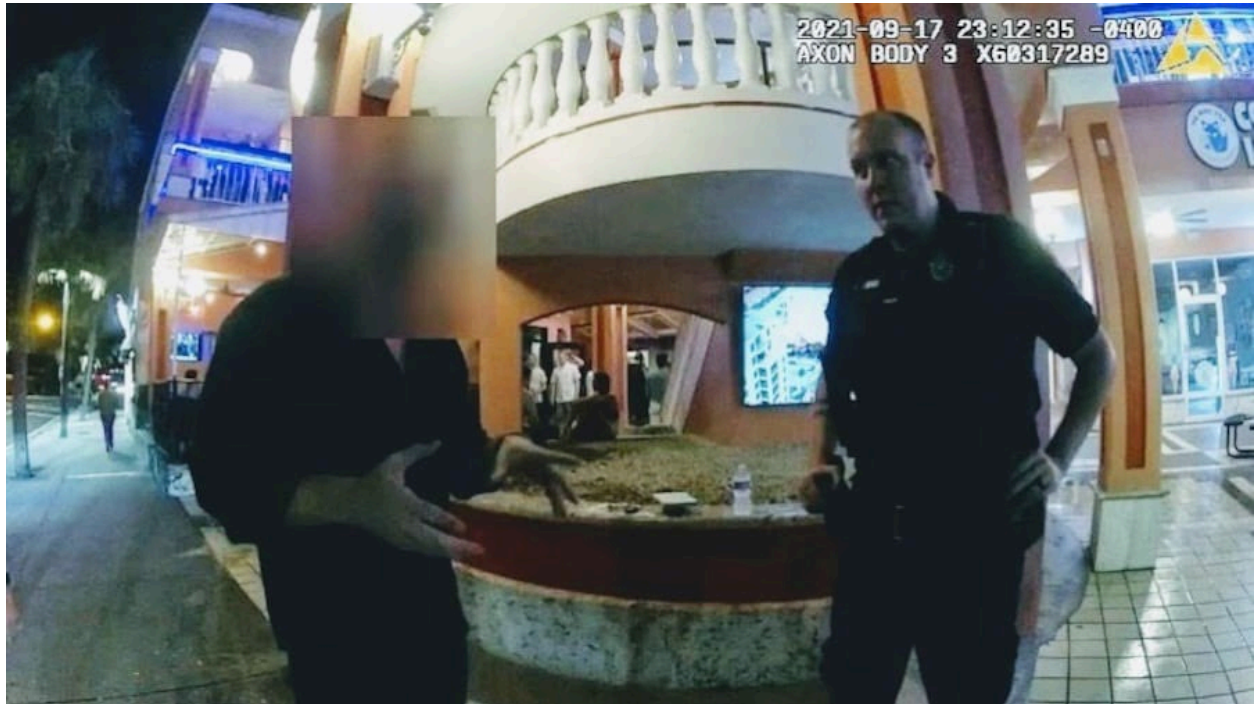


Clearwater council candidate caused bar altercations, reports say

Aaron Smith-Levin, a candidate for City Council Seat 5, acknowledged the disturbances. “I am a work in progress,” he said.



Aaron Smith-Levin, left, is seen talking to a Clearwater Police officer during an incident at Fusion Cigar Bar on Sept. 17, 2021. The Clearwater Police Department blurred Smith-Levin's face when providing the body camera footage to the Tampa Bay Times. [Clearwater Police Department]

By [Tracey McManus](#) *Times staff*

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Twice over the last two years, law enforcement officers have been called to local bars to quell altercations involving Aaron Smith-Levin, now a candidate for Clearwater City Council.

Smith-Levin, 41, was accused of behaving belligerently and provoking both incidents with vulgar insults, but neither resulted in charges, according to law enforcement records.

Asked to comment on the incidents, Smith-Levin issued a statement blaming the “hell” and “unbelievable stress” of leaving the Church of Scientology, where he spent his early life as a staffer before defecting about seven years ago. He is basing his council campaign on a pledge to stand up to the church’s dominating presence in downtown and challenge its tax-exempt status.

In the March 15 election, he faces two opponents for Seat 5 on the City Council.

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Aaron Smith-Levin [Courtesy of Aaron Smith-Levin]

On Sept. 17, the second day that potential candidates for City Council could begin collecting the 250 signatures needed to get on the ballot, Smith-Levin said he went to Fusion Cigar Lounge on Clearwater Beach to talk to voters.

At 11 p.m., he called 911 to report that he had been assaulted.

While talking to responding Clearwater police officers outside Fusion, he said that a man had punched him in the head after overhearing Smith-Levin call the man's girlfriend "crazy," according to body camera footage of the discussion.

However, police told Smith-Levin that two witnesses said he called the woman a "c--t" five times before the altercation. Smith-Levin denied to the officers that he used the word before he was hit but admitted saying it after the boyfriend punched him.

Smith-Levin declined to press charges after the officers told him he was the provocateur.

"You could have the guy write out a confession that he punched you in the face, no state attorney will ever prosecute because of the words you said to his girlfriend," Officer Justin Hennis said, according to the video.

It was not the first time police responded to a situation with Smith-Levin involving women at bars.

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In February 2020, Amy Fowler, the manager of The Rusty Lyon bar in Dunedin, issued a trespass warning to Smith-Levin after she said he harassed two women and then refused to leave, according to a Pinellas County Sheriff's Office incident report.

Fowler told a deputy that Smith-Levin had "cat called" the two women and "began to call their boyfriends names when the women were not receptive to his attention."

Smith-Levin threw Mardi Gras beads at the group and attempted to taunt the boyfriends into a fight, according to the report.

The men and women involved declined to be identified but told the responding officer that Smith-Levin "began calling them names without provocation," according to the report.

Smith-Levin left the bar after the officer explained the consequences of violating a trespass warning, the report states.

In a written statement to the *Tampa Bay Times*, Smith-Levin referenced his experience growing up in the Church of Scientology and leaving the organization at age 34 as contributing to his behavior. He said his family was torn apart by the church's policy of forced estrangement, or "disconnection," and that he has been the subject of Scientology's "fair game" policy.

The church says the policy was cancelled years ago after disgruntled former members intentionally misinterpreted it to tarnish Scientology. However, many critics and former members say "fair game" is still used to surveil, harass and intimidate those who push back against the church.

"Everyone deals with their own personal struggle on a daily basis and, like others, I have had my own difficult days," Smith-Levin's statement said. "The damage and pressure that disconnection and Fair Game has wrought on my personal life, my marriage and my family is almost impossible to communicate."

The statement continued: "My positive attitude and persona can give the impression that everything has been fine. Everything has been far from fine. And everyone who goes through the hell of leaving Scientology knows just how far from fine it can get. And yet I and my family have persevered and

made it work and I help others do the same. In the unbelievable stress and pressure of all of this, I have made mistakes. I continue to heal and grow.”

Scientology spokesman Ben Shaw said the church does “not wish to comment on local election candidates in any way.”

Smith-Levin began working on Scientology’s staff at age 12 and joined the church’s full-time Sea Org workforce at 21. His identical twin brother, who had been excommunicated from the church when the men were 20, died in a car accident about three years later in 2003 while Smith-Levin was still in the Sea Org and before the two could reconcile. Smith-Levin is campaigning on a platform that the city should stand up to Scientology abuses and push the IRS to revoke the church’s tax exemption based on alleged financial and human rights crimes.

His opponents for the City Council seat are artist and activist Lina Teixeira and the Rev. Jonathan Wade, pastor of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church.

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Police records do not identify the man who allegedly punched Smith-Levin at Fusion on Sept. 17. But when contacted by the *Times*, Pete Anderson, 41, confirmed he was the person involved.

Anderson said that Smith-Levin approached him and his girlfriend at the bar and asked them to sign his petition cards to get on the ballot. The woman, who declined to comment when reached by *Times*, later told Anderson that she knew Smith-Levin and that he had sent her “harassing messages” on Facebook a year earlier.

Anderson said he then ripped up the petition cards. When Smith-Levin approached them again later to ask if they signed the cards, Anderson said he told him to leave them alone.

“He just walked off and sat four chairs down from us and started saying disparaging things about my girlfriend, that she’s crazy and at the top of the hot/crazy matrix, yelling it loud enough so I could hear,” Anderson said.

Anderson, who said he served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan while in the Army, recalled that he approached Smith-Levin and asked him to stop the comments. He said Smith-Levin “got right in my face, screaming” and that “we got in an altercation.” Anderson declined to confirm if he punched Smith-Levin in the head but said he then left the bar. He said Smith-Levin called his girlfriend a “c--t” but could not recall if it was before or after the altercation.

“I hope that he doesn’t end up in politics,” Anderson said.

After calling police, Smith-Levin told the responding officers that he knew the woman but not her boyfriend and had asked the two to sign his petitions to get on the ballot for City Council.

Smith-Levin told police he had sent the woman the Facebook messages a year earlier “because she’s super f--cking hot” and that’s why the woman accused him of stalking her, according to the body camera footage. Smith-Levin noted the boyfriend later “thought he heard me calling his girlfriend crazy.”

“I am a work in progress,” Smith-Levin said in his statement. “I stand for growth and change. I stand for protecting Clearwater’s neighborhoods and standing up to Scientology. That’s why I’m running for council.”