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Levy County delays resolution for Suwannee River;

Individuals express fear of state and federal government intent



Seen here in the County Commission meeting on Tuesday morning (Aug. 16) are members of the public -- (foreground) Sally Ann Collins, Ron Grant (man in hat), Toni Collins (white-haired woman seated) and Dana Sheffield (far right).

Story and Photo By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 17, 2016 @ 2:57 p.m.

LEVY COUNTY -- Three individuals complained so much that they think there is reason to not trust the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the United States Department of the Interior, and to believe that the state and federal governments have ulterior motives, that one Levy County Commission member withdrew his motion and the commissioner who seconded that motion withdrew her second Tuesday morning (Aug. 17).

County Commissioner Rock Meeks had made a motion, which was seconded by County Commissioner Lilly Rooks, to adopt a resolution to proclaim the Levy County part of the Suwannee River as a National Water Trail designation. They withdrew their actions after listening to three vocal opponents.

Toni Collins, a self-proclaimed historian, Renate Cannon, who remembers the tyranny of communist East Germany, and Dana Sheffield, a Fanning Springs area resident who often questions elected and appointed government officials, expressed their concerns about a resolution proclaiming the Levy County part of the Suwannee River as a National Water Trail designation.

Collins, Cannon and Sheffield indicated that they think designating the Levy County stretch of the river as a National Water Trail designation by the U.S. Dept. of the Interior opens the doors for the federal government to stop people from launching boats or from enjoying this natural resource in any number of ways by creating federal restrictions.

After the meeting, Cannon said the U.S. Dept. of the Interior has a history of exploiting Native Americans. After the meeting, Sheffield indicated that by including the federal government in

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any way opens the door for it to intrude into the lives of American citizens.

What would have been Resolution 2016-069 in Levy County reads:

WHEREAS, the benefits of designation of the Suwannee River in Levy County as a National Water Trail include national recognition as a recreation destination, national promotion on maps and through websites, increased tourism, and increased revenue for local businesses; and

WHEREAS, our region benefits from promoting nature-based recreation opportunities, especially paddling, biking, hiking, equestrian activities, hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing, to increase health benefits to our local communities and encourage youth and families in outdoor activities; and

WHEREAS, our region benefits from promoting nature-based recreation opportunities, especially paddling, biking, hiking, equestrian activities, hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing, to increase health benefits to our local communities and encouraging youth and families to participate in outdoor activities

WHEREAS, the region benefits from promoting the rich culture and history contained within the watershed of the Suwannee River, drawing visitors eager to explore the historical legacy

WHEREAS, the Suwannee River National Water Trail offers a unique opportunity for residents and visitors to explore an unspoiled, pristine area of Florida and Georgia

WHEREAS, the cultural, historical and natural resources of this area are some of the most unique in the Southeast

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Board of County Commissioners, Levy County, Florida, endorses the Office of Greenways & Trails application for designation of the Suwannee River in Levy County as a National Water Trail by the United States Department of the Interior.

Information included in emails and attachments from Liz Sparks, the paddling trail coordinator from the Office of Greenway and Trails, Division of Recreation and Parks, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, showed this is not an eminent domain issue.

In fact, as best as can be determined from every piece of writing and interviews of people, this would have nothing other than a purely positive effect on Levy County's residents and visitors.

"Designation has NO effect on property rights of landowners along the trail or use of the waterway!" Sparks noted in one email.

If selected, the benefits of the Suwannee River designation as a National Water Trail may include:

- o Designation by the Secretary of the Interior, including a letter and a certificate announcing the designation of the Suwannee National Water Trail System (NWTS);
- o National promotion and visibility, including use of the NWTS logo in publications;
- o Positive economic impact for communities from increased tourism;
- o Opportunities to obtain technical assistance and funding for planning and implementing water trail projects;
- o Mutual support and knowledge sharing as part of a national network;
- o Assistance with recognition and special events highlighting the trail; and
- o Inclusion in NWTS online searchable database of trails;

Sparks noted that the proposed designation would encompass the river's 235 miles from Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to the Gulf of Mexico.

The NWTS is administered by the National Park Service through the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.

The program serves to bring existing and newly identified water trails together into one cohesive national network of exemplary water trails.

The NWTS is a network of water trails the public can explore and enjoy, as well as a community of water resource managers that can benefit from information sharing and collaboration.

Sparks said she has contacted every county in Georgia and Florida touched by the Suwannee River in an effort to have resolutions adopted for this project to succeed.

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Contacted by telephone on Wednesday, Wilbur Dean, the assistant to Levy County Coordinator Freddie Moody, said this resolution can help Levy County become even more noticed as a destination for eco-tourism enthusiasts, and he sees it as potentially being free advertising of the natural resources available in Levy County to help this aspect of the county's economic base.

The Levy County Board of County Commissioners may choose to approve the resolution at a meeting in September, or it may choose to completely and wholeheartedly reject the recommendation of county staff to adopt the resolution. As one vocal person at the meeting mentioned "Time will tell."