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Levy County stalls again on honorary title for river; *Town hall meeting being planned*



Liz Sparks (right), the paddling trail coordinator, from the Office of Greenway and Trails, Division of Recreation and Parks, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, speaks to the Levy County Board of County Commissioners on Tuesday (Oct. 18). Assistant to the County Coordinator Wilbur Dean is standing behind her and County Clerk Danny Shipp is in the left part of this photo.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Oct. 20, 2016 @ 10:17 p.m.

LEVY COUNTY -- Although there seems to be no logical or rational or reasonable purpose to deny approval of a resolution to put an honorary title on the Levy County portion of the Suwannee River, and even though every other county that has been approached in Florida and Georgia has done so, the four members of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners again refused.

The lead commissioner fighting against the resolution is County Commissioner Lilly Rooks.

Collins complained about the Save Our Suwannee organization disbanding. She complained about people littering in the Suwannee River. She complained about the City of Valdosta, Ga.,

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allegedly dumping so much raw sewage into the Suwannee River that is somehow severely impacts Levy County.



County commissioners Lilly Rooks (left) and Mike Joyner listen to Liz Sparks.

Collins, a self-proclaimed historian, told Liz Sparks, the paddling trail coordinator, from the Office of Greenway and Trails, Division of Recreation and Parks, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, that Collins thinks the DEP should focus more on the history of the St. Johns River because it is more historic than the Suwannee River.

Given the tirade from the outspoken resident, Rooks said she felt a Town Hall meeting was needed to help people understand more about the impact this resolution will have on Levy County's part of the Suwannee River.

Interestingly, since the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners have already adopted the resolution only half of the river between the two counties now sits "unapproved." In fact, Levy County may have the distinction of being the only county along the river in two states to not want to accept an honorary title to the river.



County Commissioner Rock Meeks, who made a motion to adopt the resolution in August, remains silent on Tuesday.

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County Commission Chairman follows the lead of Commissioner Lilly Rooks with the idea of a town hall meeting after Toni Collins again complained about the county possibly adopting this resolution.

This is the second stall for Levy County. Three individuals, two who joined Collins, complained on Aug. 17 that they think there is reason to not trust the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the United States Department of the Interior.

Those three conspiracy theorists at that meeting indicated they believe that the state and federal governments have ulterior motives.

Therefore, after County Commissioner Rock Meeks, who had made a motion to adopt the resolution about two months ago, which was then seconded by County Commissioner Rooks, those two withdrew their motions. Collins was among the contributor to both campaigns.

This simple resolution seeks to proclaim the Levy County part of the Suwannee River as a National Water Trail designation.

Renate Cannon, one of the anti-resolution speakers in August, also complained on Tuesday. She was critical of the DEP for not stopping Georgia from polluting the river that goes downstream to the Gulf of Mexico as it runs by part of the Levy County border.

County Commission Chairman John Meeks explained to Cannon that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection does not have any power to rule in Georgia. He likened the failure of Georgia to do anything about polluting the Suwannee River to Atlanta, Georgia stopping the flow of water in another river, which affects shellfish in Florida.

Sparks said she will hold a town hall meeting. Before conceding to this first-ever request in regard to this particular resolution, Sparks attempted to use clear English verbiage to nullify any fear of the feds seizing the river.

Commissioner Rooks asked if this was part of a grant application.

Sparks said this has no financial obligations or attachments. This resolution is just “asking for an honorary designation,” Sparks said. “There is no financial implications; no statutory changes. All we are asking is the Suwannee to be recognized nationally as pretty much “The Heart of Florida.””

There are only 22 National Wildlife Trails in the whole country, Sparks said. There are none yet in Florida, she added.

There is excellent management of the river by the Florida Park Service, she said.

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Sparks said this addition will link what already exists for the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, and extend the trail up into Georgia, where the river originates in the Okefenokee Swamp (Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge).

“So it is strictly adding a layer of recognition to it,” Sparks said.

There are no new products being developed. There is no new money going into it. This is just adding another method for tourists to become aware of the Suwannee River, Sparks said.

There is no change in access to the river, she added.

When Rooks said the DEP should talk to Georgia about the alleged dumping of human waste in the river, Sparks said this is an honorary title that is not related to enforcement or regulation.

Collins complained that a property owner next to the Suwannee River had to cope with tourists who did not respect that person’s private docks, etc.

Sparks said that if Levy County does not adopt the resolution, then it will be the county without the ability to put the National Water Trail logo on its maps. It will just not be a part of the Suwannee River National Water Trail.

Sparks said the designation will not affect the people who live next to the river. There is no access change resulting from the designation. The same boat ramps will still exist.

“Except for Levy County, every county has sent a resolution or a letter of support,” Sparks said.

She said this designation can potentially help rural business interests next to the river, but she does not know the level of impact it will have.

Counties that see tourism as an economic engine see this as a benefit.

Sparks said the deadline for submission of this application is Nov. 1. Commission Chairman Meeks suggested that if necessary, submit the application without Levy County endorsement and see if it can be added after the fact.

Sparks agreed to work with Wilbur Dean, assistant to County Coordinator Freddie Moody, to determine a date, time and place for a town hall meeting about this possible adoption of a resolution.

What would may be 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, 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.

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 earlier.