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## **Bronson Town Council unanimously rejects requests from town's building official**

**By Jeff M. Hardison © May 16, 2017 at 3:07 p.m.**

**BRONSON** -- Four weeks after it was first put on the agenda, the Bronson Town Council unanimously declined to accept requests for a pay increase and a request for a part-time staff member to help the town's building official.

During the Monday night (May 15) meeting, Town Clerk Pamela Whitehead read aloud the letter from Town of Bronson Building Official Robert D. "Bob" Niffenegger.

He had sent the letter April 7 to the Town Council seeking an increase in pay from \$25 an hour to \$70.

The matter was on the agenda for the Bronson Town Council to consider the request at its meeting on Monday (May 1), but Niffenegger was in the hospital at the time. He was absent from the May 15 meeting as well, reportedly in a health rehabilitation facility.

This was the second time he has requested an increase, according to his letter.

Niffenegger has more than 14 years of service in this capacity, after first being hired when Jamie Griffin was mayor of Bronson in 2002, he noted in his letter. The contract for Niffenegger was signed in December of 2002.

Shortly after that time, he was given the tasks of being a planning and development director for the town as well, he noted.

In his April 7 letter to the Bronson Town Council, Niffenegger notes that the City of Cedar Key is paying \$70 an hour for its building official, and the same hourly rate for a building inspector and for a person who makes planning and zoning decisions.

He notes that Williston has a full-time planner as a member of its staff of employees.

Chiefland Deputy Clerk Laura Cain on Thursday (April 27) said that city pays the firm of Michael T. Causley Inc. a fee that is a straight percentage for all of its services. That fee to Causley is 80 percent of the permit fee. The other 20 percent goes to the City of Chiefland, she said.

Levy County Building Official Bill Hammond formerly headed the Chiefland Building Department, but he went to join the county's ranks. After that, Chiefland hired Walter Brown of Florida Municipal Services Inc. and the Causley group as independent contractors.

As a benefit to the whole Tri-County Area of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties, the City of Chiefland then allowed the Tri-County Community Resources Center to use the former Chiefland Building Department building to be the center's home.

Niffenegger's April 7 letter provides the Bronson Town Council with a reminder about a past event.

He noted that in September of 2013, he had tendered a letter of resignation because he had felt former Town Councilman Berlon Weeks had been overly critical of his work as the building official, in regard to a structure that Weeks' owns.

"I decided I had enough abuse and was submitting my resignation," Niffenegger wrote.

In that letter, he noted for the Town Council that he would consider not resigning if the town would increase his pay to the prevailing rate in this part of Florida.

"I did not receive any answer from any of the Board (Town Council) members," Niffenegger said in his April 7 letter, "other than the vote was 4-0 to not accept my

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resignation. That vote indicated to me that they were intending to give me a raise in salary.”

He went on to note the raise never happened.

Niffenegger also noted that he never received “... the courtesy of a timely response” either in a verbal written form from any of the Town Council members after his request for an increase in pay from 2013.

In addition to an increase from \$25 to \$70 an hour, retroactive to Jan. 1, 2017, he notes that he needs a part-time inspector to be added to the town’s staff.

If the Town Council agrees to his request, Niffenegger noted that he can create a resolution to increase the building permit fees to “a more realistic amount to cover the cost.”

During the meeting Monday night, Bronson Mayor Bruce Greenlee told the town leaders that other Levy County municipalities are contracting their inspections, and building plans to an independent contractor that accepts a percentage of the fees paid to the municipalities for the service.

Deputy Town Clerk Susie Robinson said Niffenegger suffered a stroke on the Thursday before the Monday meeting four weeks ago.

Town Councilman Aaron Edmondson asked Monday night (May 15) if Niffenegger still wanted as big of an increase as he had asked for previously. That was confirmed for Edmondson.

Mayor Greenlee said no one can control health issues that occur, however the town does need to provide certain services such as building permit approvals and building inspections.

Edmondson said that if the town gives the requested raise and Niffenegger remains unable to perform the job due to health issues, then that is still not going to resolve the issues of building requests backing up.

Mayor Greenlee said the even before the most recent health issue, there was a backlog of building matters starting to occur.

“I don’t want to sound to anybody like I am some sort of a tyrant that is willing to throw somebody out on their head,” Greenlee said. “I’m not that. But we do have to make decisions for the city, and of the taxpayers of the city that not only make sense, but are going to be easy.”

This is when he brought up the method being used by other municipalities to hire independent contractors rather than having building department staff. He said, using arbitrary figures, that if the town collects \$10,000 in fees and pays \$18,000 in salary, then it is a losing proposition in regard to having a building official or staff.

After more discussion, there was a motion by Town Councilwoman Katie Parks, seconded by Town Councilman Jason Hunt, to decline Niffenegger’s request for a pay increase and to add a part-time staff member.

Mayor Greenlee said this does not terminate his employment. It is only a choice to decline from accepting the pay increase and added staff that he wanted.

Mayor Greenlee said this was all that could be decided Monday night. The mayor reminded the Town Council that it must wait to advertise if there is a plan to seek an independent contractor, so that the public will know this is a plan the Town Council is going to seek.

Something of this level of significance, Greenlee said, must be noted on the agenda beforehand so that interested parties can watch and listen to the Town Council, and to

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provide input if the people want to share input about the matter with the Town Council.

Mayor Greenlee said the Levy County Planning and Building Department is assisting the Town of Bronson for a fee in regard to plan reviews and building inspections. This is a professional courtesy the county is providing, Greenlee said, but it is not something that can continue.

The county “got out of” the business of planning and building department services for municipalities some time ago, Greenlee said.