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Levy County amends comprehensive plan

By Jeff M. Hardison © June 7, 2017 at 3:27 p.m.

BRONSON -- As required by the state, the Levy County Board of County Commissioners on Tuesday morning (June 6) amended the county's Comprehensive Plan.

Each seven years, each of the 67 counties and all of the municipalities within those counties must review and revise the plans that serve as guides for growth and development in those areas.

Levy County Planning Director Shenley Neely went through each of the 12 elements and Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks sought public input on each element, conducting a public hearing for each one.

Many of the elements remained unchanged and some had only minor revisions.

With each element, all five county commissioners voted in favor of adopting them, although those adoptions included some on-the-spot revisions.

The comprehensive plan is a blueprint that was created by the people. It shows how growth is wanted. It includes goals, objectives and policies, Neely said in a telephone interview on Wednesday afternoon.

The goals are the vision of the people for how they want the county to grow. There are requirements included by the state in regard to each element, too, such as conservation of natural resources.

Objectives are how the goals are to be accomplished and policies are the specific rules for abiding by the policies in efforts to reach the goals.

The land development code for the county is based on the comprehensive plan. That code includes specific language, for instance, that a structure must be a certain distance from the mean high water mark of a river and the like.

The 12 elements that were updated on Tuesday are transportation-circulation; housing; coastal management; conservation; recreation and open space; infrastructure; future land use; intergovernmental coordination; capital improvements; economic; public schools; and the springs protection element.

In regard to coastal management, County Commissioner Lilly Rooks asked if the language about prohibiting activities that lead to saltwater intrusion would limit the City of Cedar Key in its wells that provide fresh water to the city.

Director Neely said she believes that the city's procedure which previously required a short-term reverse osmosis method is not causing saltwater intrusion. The use of fresh water by the city of Cedar Key, Neely said, is not something that is causing saltwater intrusion there.

John McPherson, general manager of the Cedar Key Water and Sewer District, provided insight about reverse osmosis, saltwater intrusion, the past, present and future in that regard.

During a telephone interview Wednesday afternoon, McPherson said a severe drought in May and June of 2012 led to a detection of saltwater intrusion into a city-operated well.

By Aug. 1, 2012, the city had a reverse osmosis operation working to provide fresh water.

Soon after that, however, two tropical storms dropped enough rain to wash out the wellfield so that reverse osmosis was no longer needed, McPherson said. In fact, he

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added, the system does not work well with fresh water. Reverse osmosis is a system for filtering saltwater to make it into freshwater that can be consumed.

Since the tropical storms, the Cedar Key Water and Sewer District has kept its reverse osmosis machinery ready, even though it is not in use. It can be implemented again quickly if needed.

If the current trend of low rainfall continues, McPherson said, and if saltwater intrusion is detected again, then the city's water district will return to using the reverse osmosis machinery.

As for the city's draw of water from that particular aquifer, which is not as big of an aquifer as the Floridan Aquifer, McPherson said he believes the experts would explain how it is a drought rather than the draw of freshwater from that source that caused some saltwater intrusion there.

In that aquifer, saltwater is ever-present, he said. The freshwater floats on top of the saltwater, he said. When there is a drought, the top level of freshwater is depleted to the point where saltwater intrudes to the place where it formerly was a source for potable water.

McPherson said the city consistently monitors its water source, and as a result of the 2012 saltwater intrusion event, the Cedar Key Water and Sewer District is even more prepared now to quickly respond as required to prevent saltwater from flowing through the pipelines into residences and businesses.

There was another element that included a Cedar Key factor to it.

In regard to the economic element, County Commissioner Matt Brooks asked about adding the word "aquaculture" to the verbiage about policies to attract people to farm tours and agricultural tourism. Commissioner Rooks added to his question as she made it clear that she wanted "aquaculture" added there.

Overall, the seven-year review and approval process of the Levy County Comprehensive Plan went relatively quickly.

Director Neely has been working for years to prepare for these amendments as she gathered data and analysis to update maps, and to find information to support the existing documents or to revise them. County Attorney Anne Bast Brown and Director Neely, too, have been working together for weeks on amending and revising the verbiage in the documents.

These revisions will be provided to the state government agencies for review. In the meantime, the county will continue moving along with growth matters as they occur. The amendment process does nothing to hinder plans that may be under way in the county.