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Dog trainer approved 3-1 for special exception to zoning



Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. Founder and Chief Executive Officer Carol Borden answers questions as she seeks to have a special exception to build a new dog-training facility in Levy County.

Story and Photo By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 20, 2017 at 9:07 a.m.

LEVY COUNTY – A company that trains dogs to become medical service dogs gained a 3-1 vote of approval from the Levy County Commission on Tuesday morning (Sept. 19) for a special exception on land where it intends to construct a new facility.

Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. was recommended for approval by staff members of Levy County government and the Levy County appointed volunteers who sit as a review board for this type of application.

County Commissioner Rock Meeks had to abstain from voting, he announced before the public hearing on the special exception, because he is involved with plumbing work that would be completed at the construction site to be located south of Williston off of 200th Avenue.

The motion to approve was by County Commissioner Mike Joyner, seconded by Commissioner Matt Brooks. Chairman John Meeks voted in favor of it too. Commissioner Lilly Rooks voted against it.

During the discussion about this compound to include fewer than 80 dogs, although that was not a condition and it has a capacity to contain more than 100 dogs, Rooks said she does not see trees as a noise buffer for barking dogs.

Commissioner Rooks told the project planner – Clay Sweger, director of planning at EDA Engineers-Surveyors-Planners Inc. of Gainesville – that if trees stop the sound of dogs barking, then he needs to come over to her house and talk to the trees on her property, because she hears her neighbor's two dogs barking every time they are outside and barking. And those dogs are two miles from her house, Rooks said.

The special exception is for the project that is on 65.56 acres more or less, Levy County Building Official Bill Hammond said, located at 650 200th Ave. near Williston. This part of the county is generally known as Morriston.

The property is zoned agriculture/rural residential. Among the permitted uses without a special exception for this type of zoning is a sawmill, and the project planner mentioned his belief that this dog-training facility will be less noisy than that.

Commissioner Joyner was told that the method for dog feces which is currently practiced by

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the company at its existing facility near Williston will continue. The waste is hauled offsite by a contractor, and it is an approved method by the Florida Department of Health.

Linda Cooper complained to the County Commission that the documents supporting the application included a reference to a standard of care endorsed by the Levy County Humane Society.

Cooper shared her opinion that the Levy County Humane Society is inactive and its standards are not in writing anywhere she could find.

Cooper suggested the county require Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. to abide by the standards set by the United States Humane Society.

County Attorney Anne Bast Brown explained that the advisory committee recommending approval looked at existing Levy County codes and made reference to what is included in those documents, which includes a reference to the Levy County Humane Society.

Levy County in consideration of this special exception, attorney Brown said, cannot rewrite the county code. That change will occur when the local laws are updated and improved at some point in the future. Cooper's request to impose this level of care via a condition of the special exception to the zoning designation, Brown said, is not able to occur at this County Commission meeting on Tuesday (Sept. 19).

Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. Founder and Chief Executive Officer Carol Borden said her facility uses guidelines provided by the United States Department of Agriculture. Borden went on to say the level of care provided to the dogs far exceeds any minimal standards for dog care.

Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. uses four veterinarians for animal medical care, Borden said.

One of the 12 special conditions required for approval of this special exception is inspections by Levy County Animal Services and the Levy County Health Department, with reasonable warning ahead of that inspection. Cooper asked for a definition of "reasonable."

Commission Chairman Meeks indicated it would not be three days advance notice to prepare for such an inspection, but that it would occur during regular business hours.

Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. trains dogs, mostly German Shepherds, to assist people with medical disabilities such as veterans who suffer from post-traumatic shock, or who have lost limbs.

Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. has helped 200 teams of clients and canines over the past eight years, Borden said, and while there is a relatively high suicide rate for military veterans, there have been no clients of this service who took their own life.

Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs Inc. currently employs 27 paid employees and it accepts 50,000 volunteer hours of work a year from individuals who help without pay, Borden said. There are currently seven trainers and three apprentices.

In answering a question about the service provided by this company, Borden said the dogs are each trained to work with an individual client.

The dogs are trained to mitigate the challenges of each person's individual disability, she said.

For instance, a wheelchair bound person would have a medical service dog to open and close doors; pickup dropped items; turn lights on and off; bring food and water to the client from the refrigerator; help the client transfer from the shower; and other tasks to help the client live a life with more ease. The dogs are trained to perform actions off of a leash and collar, Borden added, to let the person not have to hold that while going about their daily routines.

In answering another question, Borden said her clients first came primarily from Florida, but now she is seeing an average of 40 requests a day from across the nation.