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City Commission considers ordinance revision to limit RV stays in Chiefland RV parks



Alan Wallace, one of the developers of Southern Leisure RV Resort, speaks to the Chiefland City Commission. (from left) Mayor Betty Walker, City Commissioner Donald Lawrence and City Commissioner Chris Jones are on the other side of the desk from Wallace. In the background on the left is City Manager Mary Ellzey, who is also the clerk of the city, and Deputy City Clerk Laura Cain. Out of view behind this camera angle are City Attorney Norm Fugate, City Commissioner Teresa Barron and City Commissioner Rollin Hudson.

Story and Photo By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 12, 2017 at 11:27 p.m.

CHIEFLAND -- The Nov. 27 and Dec. 11 Chiefland Planning Board and Chiefland City Commission meetings are part of the process leading to a potential "five-star" RV resort being built in Chiefland.

At the Monday night (Dec. 11) second round of the Chiefland Planning Board and then Chiefland City Commission meetings there was some action, and there was some tabling of other action as developer Alan Wallace represented himself and other entrepreneurs involved in this venture.

Attorney Stephen C. "Steve" Booth served as the spokesman for developers at the Nov. 27 meeting.

The first phase of this resort is 218 units on 46 acres, Booth said. Construction costs for this part of the project, he said, is about \$5 million. Other acreage adjoining the RV resort is planned for commercial purposes in the future.

The City Commission unanimously approved the final site plan for Southern Leisure RV Resort on a motion by City Commissioner Donald Lawrence seconded by Vice Mayor Chris Jones on Dec. 11. Acting as the Planning Board, the same five people reviewed the request and the same two members made motions and seconds to recommend approval to themselves.

As for a request to change one ordinance issue – which currently requires an RV to move off of a site after 180 days – the City Commission tabled its decision on that request until it meets in January.

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At the meeting two weeks ago, attorney Booth told the City Commission that the developers wanted to have the city's ordinance in regard to RV parks amended. He described this proposed development as being "different from the typical mom and pop facility."

Adding to this overview, Booth noted the RV resort will be providing about twice as much space per-vehicle in contrast with what the current ordinance shows as a mandatory minimum amount of space-per-RV.

One key issue was that "Recreational Vehicles are not to be set up for more than 180 consecutive days," according to the current ordinance. One possible modification might be changing "set up" with "occupied," however the City Commission is not leaning in one direction or the other on this issue yet.

On Nov. 28, Booth surmised the 180-day rule was from the Federal Emergency Management Agency wanting units to remain mobile for flood zone issues. He said this land is not a flood zone. He did not mention that Florida has a hurricane season from June 1 through Nov. 30.

Another thought about why to leave the 180-day limit in place in Chiefland is that at some point, the original developers would not be the owners of the property. The new owners might allow a degradation of parked vehicles to occur to the point of it become a blighted slum, like some trailer parks have evolved in Florida over the past several decades.

During the meeting on Dec. 11, Wallace explained that "park models" are stable structures that do not move. He added that his marketing model -- which has shown successful development of RV resorts in Florida during the past 30 years -- allows the lot-renters to leave their RVs on a lot year-round.

Wallace said they may live in the RV for three months, four months or even as long as six months, but then most of the RV resort residents return to their northern homes -- especially in the summer.

While attorney Booth intimated that not changing the 180-day limit could be a deal breaker, Wallace took the tabling of that request well on Monday night.

City Commissioner Teresa Barron led the thinking behind waiting before changing this part of the ordinance. Barron said the city leaders need to think before they change that aspect of the municipal law.

There is another RV park planned for construction within a few miles of this one. Wallace said he believes Chiefland will benefit from both RV parks being established.

In a city with a population of about 2,500, however the sudden influx of another 250 or so people will be felt. Many of these RV owners are retirees. The increase of medical calls to Chiefland Fire Rescue was not directly addressed at the late November meeting or the meeting on Dec. 11.

City Manager Mary Ellzey said there is an impact fee for new development, when she was asked that question by HardisonInk.com.

There were repeated references to Williston Crossings RV Resort, a development that Wallace and others brought back from being a derelict property. However, the Williston Fire Rescue and Chiefland Fire Rescue are two different departments.

WFR Chief Lamar Stegall has a wealth of professionals who volunteer. Many of the firefighters, EMTs and paramedics in Williston have paying jobs in that profession as they work in Levy, Marion and Alachua counties.

There is not that much volunteer talent in the Chiefland area.

City Manager Ellzey said she believes the ordinance regulating RV parks in Chiefland needs to be updated.

Vice Mayor Chris Jones suggested that interested city residents show up at the January

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meeting of the City Commission, because that may be the night when the city leaders choose to do away with any requirement to limit the amount of time that an RV owner is allowed to park a vehicle in the resort.

This resort will be a gated community, with a pool, clubhouse and other amenities.

Wallace said the people who will be using the spaces are bound to spend money within the city at restaurants, stores and gas stations.

As for the Olympic-size swimming pool being a magnet for ne'er-do-well juveniles who might jump a fence and require police escorts, that has not been a problem in Williston.

Any stress the influx of winter residents might put on traffic, police, fire or other resources all appears to be within manageable numbers, because there have been no objections from any person to these recreational vehicle parks.

City Attorney Norm Fugate mentioned that the winter visitors at the RV park in Williston add to the pews in churches in that city. For the dozen or so members of the Rotary Club of Williston, there have been a couple of winter members in the past.

In her discussion about a preference to have RVs not being in place for longer than 180 days, Commissioner Barron said she thought this was going to be an RV park where that is the case.

Barron said she thought the people would come in the winter and then go with their RVs after a few months.

Wallace said he and his partners encourage RV owners to leave their vehicles in place year-round. Some RV owners, he said, are relatively old and they prefer not to drive back and forth with these huge vehicles.

By having renters care for the small plots of grass around their parking spaces, it improves the quality of life for the RV resort residents, Wallace said. Some RV owners buy small storage sheds and place them next to the lots that they rent.

If people take their RVs and their added touches when they leave during the summer, he said, it will take away from the aesthetic value that exists. The resort might look like a vacant ghost town.

"That's your job for landscaping," Barron said in response to Wallace commenting about the RV owners who rent lot space.

Wallace said the resort management does take care of landscaping.

"If every site was vacant six months out of the year," Wallace said, "it would look vacant. We encourage people to leave their rig, go home and then come back to it."

Wallace said he has developed four parks from start to finish in Florida, and he has found this method makes it so "You don't end up with Section 8 people."

Twenty-five years ago, Wallace said, he developed an RV park in Zephyrhills. Emerald Pointe RV Resort in Zephyrhills was first developed by Wallace, he said, and it continues to be a high quality park.

Wallace, who is the chairman of the board of the Florida Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds, said he has a passion for this way of life. This is affordable housing that provides a lot of enjoyment to many people, he said.

Wallace opened a new RV park in January of 2017 with 275 sites in Brooksville. It is 100 percent booked to be full this winter, he said.

As for changes the city leaders might make to their relatively old ordinance for RV parks in regard to the sections discussed on Nov. 28, City Manager Ellzey said the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council is amicable to the city revising its ordinance as discussed on Nov. 18.

Ellzey provided the City Commission members with 25 pages of documents that include the Florida Statutes, the current city ordinance in regard to the 180-day rule, the ordinance used by

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the city of Newberry, the city of Williston's ordinances for RV parks, and the Sumter County ordinances related to RV parks.

Mayor Betty Walker championed the idea to table the decision about changing the 180-day stay limit in Chiefland until the first meeting in January, to give all of the City Commission members time to read the material, and formulate their own ideas in this regard.

Likewise, this will give constituents a chance to call their city commissioners to share their feelings about what the city might ask of the developer before changing the limits on how long an RV can stay in the park or resort.