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Chiefland forum shows alcohol sales on Sunday potential exists; *Leaders may vote Oct. 22*



(from left) The Chiefland City Commission is comprised of (from left) City Commissioner Tim West, City Commissioner Rollin Hudson, Mayor Betty Walker, City Commissioner Donald Lawrence and Vice Mayor Chris Jones.

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Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © Oct. 10, 2018 at 3:38 p.m.

CHIEFLAND -- A public forum conducted by the Chiefland City Commission on Tuesday night (Oct. 9) showed the potential for a majority of those five municipal leaders to revise or do away with an existing ordinance that prohibits the sale of alcoholic beverages within the city limits on Sundays.

<https://youtu.be/aY9i8NEvT34>

In this video, Charly King shares with listeners that he and others have fought to keep America free. He believes the people who reside or visit Chiefland should be free to buy beer, wine or other alcoholic beverages on Sunday in this city.

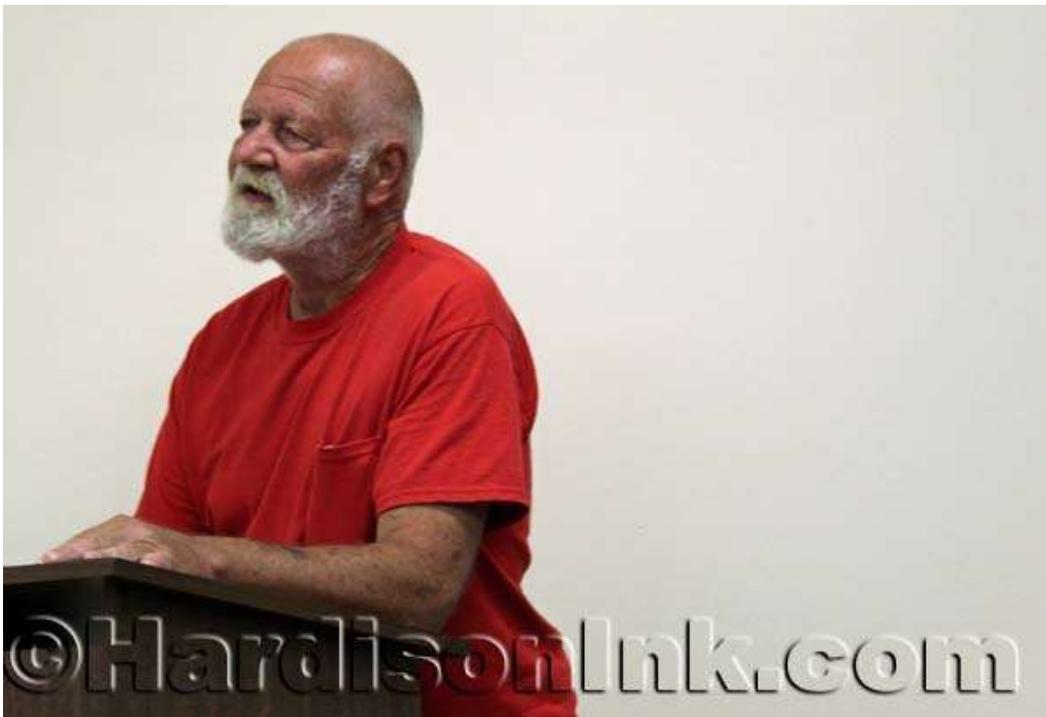
<https://youtu.be/GadVouKkXSw>

In this video, Vice Mayor Chris Jones says drinking does not make a person bad. He also says the city is like a business that needs money to continue. Prior to this part of his speech, he said he was called by people who were offensive to him – as they implied they knew the bible better than him.

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Keith Finger is the first speaker of the night. He favors alcohol being available for purchase in Chiefland on Sundays.

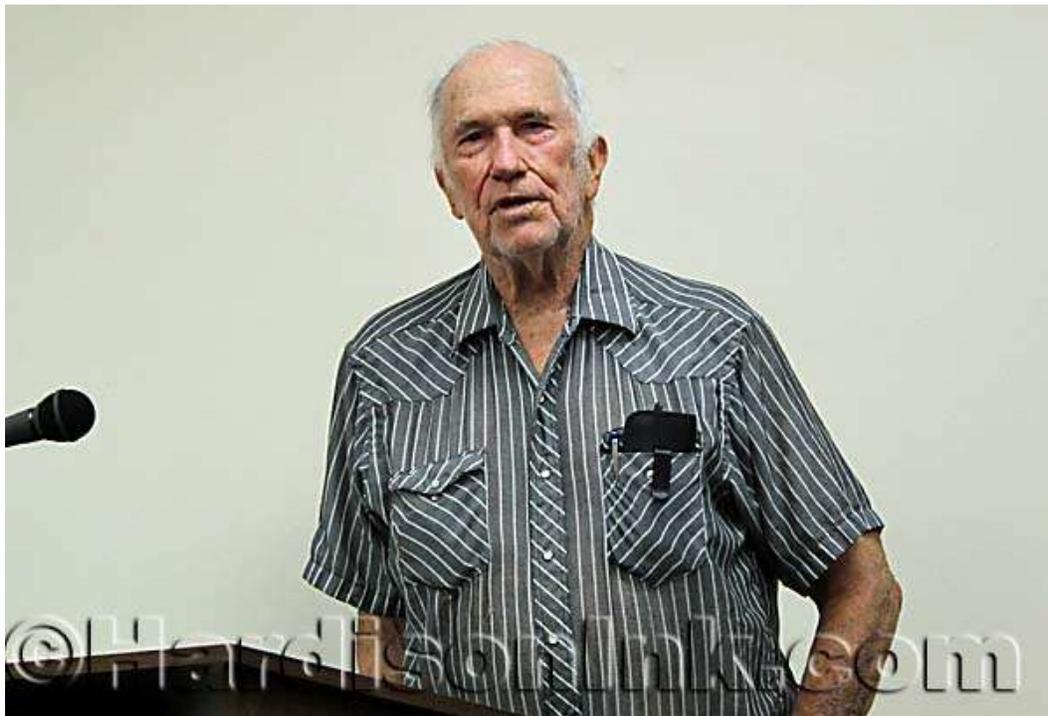


Artie DeMurias believes allowing alcohol sales in Chiefland on Sunday will benefit the city.

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Marie Strange has long opposed alcoholic beverages being sold on Sunday. She wants Chiefland to keep the ordinance as it exists now.



Charly King is a longtime United States Air Force veteran who fought to keep America free. Prohibition of alcohol sales on Sunday in Chiefland is something he sees as taking away a certain amount of freedom.

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Taylor Reyes wants to be able to buy alcohol in Chiefland on Sundays. He is a Chiefland High School graduate who is 21 years old or older.



Jacob Piazza owns property in Chiefland and in Dixie County. He wants to see Chiefland progress. Chiefland taxes went up and Dixie County taxes went down, he said.

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Tom Kiernan is opposed to changing the prohibition. He chooses not to imbibe.



Brad Groom said he and his family leave Chiefland on Sunday, because there is no where in town to sit and watch sports and have a beer on that day.

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Chuck Strange, not a relative of Marie Strange, owns Chiefland Billiards. He sees changing the ordinance as a positive action for the city to help the local economy.



Mayor Betty Walker

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Vice Mayor Chris Jones



City Commissioner Tim West

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City Commissioner Rollin Hudson



City Commissioner Donald Lawrence

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Charly King and Marie Strange have opinions on this issue that are exactly opposing to one another. At the end of the discussion, though, these two individuals show no animosity toward one another and are friends.

The Hardy Dean Sr. Municipal Building (Chiefland City Hall) was completely filled with people, despite it being a week night and in spite of people needing to prepare for an impending storm.

The number of people speaking at the podium in favor of allowing alcohol to be sold was more than 20 and the people wanting to keep the prohibition was fewer than five.

On Oct. 22, the Chiefland City Commission will have an opportunity to vote on the matter if there is a motion and a second to do so. Then, if three or more City Commission members vote in favor of it, the sales of alcohol in the city can occur on Sundays -- as it does on Mondays through Saturdays currently, although the City Commission may even restrict the Sunday sales to some limit of hours.

The speaking session Monday night was well-ordered.

Chiefland Betty Walker told people they must limit their speeches to three minutes. Speakers were also required to put their name on a list for the record.

Keith Finger was the first to speak.

He has been in the area about four years, he said. Finger, who said he is a Baptist, sees nothing wrong with selling alcohol on Sundays.

People can buy the beverages elsewhere on Sundays, just like they buy it in Chiefland on the six other days of the week. By the Sunday sales prohibition, Finger said he believes this is making some companies develop their interests in other locations.

Christine Hentschel said that when her family entertains people and alcohol purchase is needed on a Sunday, they take their friends to High Springs, Crystal River or Gainesville rather than staying in Chiefland.

"I'm a Christian," Hentschel said, "and I don't think there is anything wrong with having a glass of wine with a meal."

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Artie DeMurias said he has lived in the area for 11 years, as he began to share his opinion on the issue.

The ability for people to buy alcohol on Sunday in Chiefland, DeMurias said, is that it will promote more business for the Chiefland area.

On Sundays, everyone who might want a glass of beer, a glass of wine or another alcoholic beverage is going elsewhere.

“It’s driving every business out of this area,” he said, “rather than keeping it here locally.”

Marie Strange, a consistently strong advocate against the sale of alcoholic beverages on Sunday, used her three minutes to read the description the city has on its website, and to cite the health and economic problems caused by over-indulgence in the consumption of alcohol.

Charly King gave a strong speech in favor of changing the existing local law.

King was in the United States Air Force for 22 years before being honorably discharged from the service. He has six brothers who, when combining everyone’s service in the military, served for more than 142 years.

“That’s what we went to war for,” King said, “to give everybody a privilege to be free. We fought for that.

“I do not understand,” King continued, “how you can sit here and tell some people you don’t have a right to drink, or when you can have it.”

King said the last thing he would advocate is that any person takes a drink of an alcoholic beverage; however, people who are going to use it will drive elsewhere to buy it on Sunday.

He asked the city’s leaders why they want to endorse sending the tax revenue from those beverage sales to some municipality other than Chiefland.

King has sat as a member of the Chiefland City Commission, he said. And years ago, he lost an election because he endorsed changing the law that stops the sale of alcohol in Chiefland on Sundays.

King challenges any person, including Marie Strange, to explain to him why there should not be alcohol sales in the city of Chiefland on Sundays. He does not see a valid reason.

“Let’s quit this foolishness,” King said. “Get out of the dark ages.”

Frank Storti reminded listeners that the forefathers of the United States of America separated church from state when they fought for independence from England.

Not having alcohol sales on one day a week is not going to make a big difference on the impact of alcohol on the moral fiber or health of the community where it is sold six other days, he said, as he conceded that Marie Strange’s recitation of facts and figures about alcohol abuse is valid.

Storti said Chiefland has sweepstakes rooms, which may be illegal gambling. He said the more important matter than the prohibition of alcohol sales on Sunday is the creation of more jobs.

Joy Parker mentioned her hope that more jobs will open in Chiefland to help the youth. More restaurants might locate in the city if they could sell alcohol on Sundays, she said.

Bobby Baker said he has lived in Chiefland for six or seven years, and this is the only place in Florida that he knows of that does not sell alcohol on Sundays.

“I don’t think it (those sales) will make drunks out of nobody,” he said. “I know it

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won't for me, because I don't drink that much. I only drink once in a while. I don't see any harm in it."

Baker said he thinks those sales would bring tax revenue back to the city.

Several people mentioned that they think increasing business and tax revenue will let the city give police officers a better raise. Some speakers said they would like to see the city increase its business opportunities, because one potential spinoff benefit from an increased tax base is a reduced burden on the taxpayers who cover those expenses.

Taylor Reyes is a Chiefland High School graduate who said he likes to drink with friends. Since he works two jobs, Reyes said he only gets Sunday off. And while he might like to drink with friends, he cannot do that in Chiefland on Sundays.

Dr. Kelly Moore said she and her husband operate a pool tournament business. Their preferred place to host tournaments in this region of Florida is Chiefland Billiards. Their establishment hosts tournaments, she said, and when there is a Sunday included, they must take the event elsewhere.

These pool tournaments, Moore said, can bring in 150 to 200 people. Those pool players stay in motels in Chiefland, she said, and they buy gasoline, food and other items from other merchants in Chiefland.

Bob Mount, a dentist, said he has lived in the city for four years now. He has watched the City Commission struggle with its budget. It can raise taxes, or hope for an increased tax base to generate more revenue.

Dr. Mount said he does not see restaurants that sell alcohol on Sundays as being an issue for the safety and welfare of the community. People who enjoy a drink or two with their meals are not a problem.

"This is not a bar situation," he said. "This is a revenue situation."

He mentioned that other business interests in Chiefland are put at a disadvantage on Sundays, because people who go elsewhere as consumers on that day, will do other shopping away from the city then as well.

Jacob Piazza has been the president of the Chiefland Chamber of Commerce before. He owns six properties in the city limits.

Piazza said his property management company owns a total of 13 properties. The highest tax rate is for those in the city limits of Chiefland. His taxes on property he manages in the city of Chiefland went up, and all of the taxes for property he owns in Dixie County went down.

Therefore, Piazza said, common sense is making him inclined to sell all of his property in Chiefland and invest that money in Dixie County.

Beef O' Brady's built its franchise outside of the city limits, Piazza said, because of the alcohol sales prohibition on Sundays.

Piazza said he would like to see Chiefland grow in a responsible manner. He would like to see business come to Chiefland.

"I want to be able to watch football on Sunday and drink a beer," Piazza said, "and not have to go to Gainesville to do it. I mean that's ridiculous."

Tom Kiernan said he wants the prohibition against alcoholic beverage sales on Sunday to stay in force in Chiefland. Kiernan said he is a retired Baptist preacher who believes in abstinence from drinking alcohol.

This speaker said he was a first responder with a fire department and saw the carnage on the highways from drunk drivers. He also said he was the son of an alcoholic father.

"From my perspective of being a pastor, a firefighter and an alcoholic's son," Kiernan

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said, "if it saves one person on one day, then it's worth the lost income."

Another person who favors the continuation of the ban against alcohol sales in Chiefland is Cheryl Collins.

"Our God told us to keep the Sabbath and to keep it holy," Collins said. "And I think to honor our God that we should try to keep it holy. And selling alcohol on Sunday... If money is the bottom line, then we are selling out God for money."

Ray Groom said he and his wife and children live in Chiefland. On Sundays, he said, the family goes to Gainesville or Crystal River.

Once in the other cities, they watch sports and drink beer on Sunday, Groom said. Then they shop at Walmart or Tractor Supply Co., only not the ones in Chiefland.

Groom said the family would prefer to spend their money locally. He said the Chamber of Commerce endorses people to "Buy Local."

"Well, that's fine," Groom said, "unless you want to have a beer on a Sunday with lunch."

He added that his daughter and her friends are 19. So, the alcohol sales issue is irrelevant to her. They go to Gainesville to watch a movie or to bowl, or to do any other entertaining activities, because there is nothing like that in Chiefland, he said.

Companies like those offering this type of entertainment need to be able to operate seven-days-a-week, he said.

Robin Tindall works in the bartending environment. She said the thing to remember is that the city makes revenue off taxes, but the bartenders and other support workers earn a living from these business interests.

By adding Sunday sales of alcohol in Chiefland, that increases job opportunities, she said.

As for the religious people, Tindall reminded them that Jesus turned water into wine.

"If Jesus gives it to His people," Tindall asked, "then why can't we give it to ours?"

Several speakers mentioned that the Bible does not say people should not drink alcohol. It does say people should not become overly intoxicated.

Cody Williams, who was born and raised in Chiefland, said he turns 28 on Thursday (Oct. 11). He has worked in businesses in town and his parents have owned business interests in town.

Right now, he is working as a bartender. Williams said he cannot work on Sunday, because Chiefland Billiards is in the city limits. When he wants to work on Sundays, he has to travel to Cedar Key to bartend.

Chuck Strange said he lives in Chiefland and owns Chiefland Billiards.

Many of the people who bought houses in Chiefland before the year 2000, Strange said, have an appraised value below those who bought in the 21st Century. He sees the newer homeowners in the area as having the higher tax burden, due to Homestead Exemption.

Business owners are the other workhorses for carrying the burden of ad valorem property taxes in Chiefland, Strange said he believes.

As many people as were in the meeting room, Strange said, there are just as many out of the room working or resting for the next day of work, to make those ad valorem taxes able to be paid.

Strong said he has spoken to several people in the past. A number of people did not even come to the forum to share their input with the City Commission, he said, because they have seen time after time when the Chiefland City Commission simply ignored the

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majority of people and rejected the people's choice to do away with the Sunday prohibition against alcohol sales Chiefland.

Other people spoke in favor of changing the law. One person wrote a letter and asked City Manager Mary Ellzey to read it, which she did.

After the public spoke, Vice Mayor Chris Jones shared some information with the people.

Vice Mayor Jones said that during the past several days he had received several offensive telephone calls.

"I've been going to church pretty much all of my life," Vice Mayor Jones said. "I don't necessarily need someone to preach to me or tell me your own perception about how something should be.

"There is nowhere in the bible," Jones said, "and I challenge someone to read that bible, with regard to stating 'You shouldn't drink.' It speaks of the consumption of too much alcohol."

Beyond the people who took it upon themselves to present themselves as somehow being more holy than Jones, there is a single factor that the people of the United States of America must remember, he said.

There is a separation between state and church, Jones said, as he reminded the Americans in the room.

Jones said one reason to separate the church and state is reflected by matters such as this. Here there are some women who called him and told him that he did not understand the bible.

Jones said he understands the word of God very well.

However, whoever is in power in government cannot impose upon the people his or her own version of the correct interpretation of God's word. The city of Chiefland, like the state of Florida and the nation or the United States of America, is not a theocracy.

Vice Mayor Jones said there are so many different churches on every corner of every street in Texas, because there are so many different beliefs about what the bible says.

Jones said he endorses changing the law not because of any religious belief. He thinks it is in the best interest of the city for it to grow its business.

Consuming alcohol, he said, does not make any person into a bad person. The city is a business and it needs more revenue, Jones said.

The vote in this regard on Oct. 22 is probably going to be Mayor Walker, Vice Mayor Jones and City Commissioner Tim West voting in favor of allowing alcohol to be sold in the city, with City Commissioner Rollin Hudson and City Commissioner Donald Lawrence voting against that motion.

However, the vote could go any which way, because a vote cannot be counted until it has been cast.