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Decorum absent from Bronson Town Council meeting;

Gambling machines may be in Bronson's future



In this *HardisonInk.com* file photo from November of 2018, the words 'Fish Tables' are clearly painted on the front of a building that was raided and closed for being an illegal gambling operation known as an Internet café.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © April 16, 2019 at 3:09 p.m.

BRONSON – Despite Bronson Mayor Robert Partin reading from the town's rules for an orderly meeting immediately prior to a rowdy discussion, decorum was relatively absent Monday night (April 15) at the Town Council meeting.

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Bronson Mayor Robert Partin explains the guidelines for addressing Town Council. The written rules of decorum were ignored Monday night, as they have been for years now at Bronson Town Council meetings, even when Bruce Greenlee was mayor and before that when Franklin Schuler was mayor.



Bronson Town Councilman Berlon Weeks, said he was simply looking for methods to reduce spending in the town to keep a balanced budget. His conversations with Town Clerk Shirley Miller and Bronson Parks and Recreation Director Curtis Stacy led to the hubbub Monday night. There's been no resolution to the issue of spending more money on parks and recreation in Bronson than those sports activities generate funds.

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While the town's laws note speakers will identify themselves and speak from the podium, that did not happen.

The mayor read the decorum rules:

- * The presiding officer (on Monday night, the mayor) shall keep the level of decorum proper at all times.

- * Each speaker shall have up to three minutes at the podium.

- * First, the speaker will state his or her name and address.

- * The presiding officer will recognize the person before they make a statement or ask questions.

- * Statements are to be directed to the council body and not individuals.

- * Discussions between the speaker and members of the audience will not be allowed.

- * No personal attacks against any individual will be allowed during the meeting.

- * Profanity, or aggressive or threatening behavior will not be permitted.

- * During meetings, cell phones are to be turned off or silenced.

There were points where more than one person was speaking. In fact, Town Councilman Berlon Weeks a few times did not allow Shane Schuler to complete a sentence before Weeks started arguing with Schuler by talking over him.

As for the presiding officer, Mayor Partin took little to no action other than tapping a gavel a few times as he tried to maintain a semblance of order. One unidentified member of the audience commented on the mayor finding the gavel once, although he may not have heard the comment due to the background noise.

The Town Council meeting room in the Dogan Cobb Municipal Building was completely filled, and the overwhelming majority of occupants were proponents of the Bronson Parks and Recreation (BPR) Department.

Rumor and gossip appear to have spread like wildfire on Facebook prior to the meeting, apparently after Bronson Town Councilman Weeks discovered from Town Clerk Shirley Miller that the expenses for BPR equaled about \$86,500, however revenue from the Parks and Recreation Department was about \$37,800.

Revenue for BPR is generated from profits at the concession stand, a \$13,000-a-year cell tower space rental for Verizon, and fees paid by parents and sponsors for children's equipment and uniforms. There was no discussion about what part of the town's general revenue, which comes from ad valorem property taxes, would be dedicated to recreation.

Also, like the other four districts in Levy County, District One (which includes Bronson) receives money from the County Commission for recreation.

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BPR Director Curtis Stacy (left) says he understands how things happen in regard to people suddenly losing employment with the Town of Bronson. Shane Schuler stands next to Stacy. Schuler, who works and lives in Gainesville, dedicates time to the BPR as a volunteer coach.



Town Councilman Jason Hunt is seen here. He said that his daughter has been involved in town sports, but for now he is requiring her to focus more on academics than extracurricular activities.

BPR Director Curtis Stacy expressed his concern from the podium Monday night that he was going to be fired. Mayor Partin said that as a member of the Town Council, he held only one vote, but that firing Stacy was not something Partin would consider.

There was no resolution to the question of recreational services in the town costing more than current fees, or revenue sources other than from ad valorem property taxes.

Linda Cooper of Williston said she believes the Bronson town government should not be involved in recreation other than park maintenance. She spoke about parents in Williston who

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run the sports programs in that city.

There was some discussion about a great need for more volunteers, and about the town being used as a babysitting service as parents drop off children for practice and games, leaving the children at the park and sometimes not returning in a timely manner to pick them up.

People also spoke about the poor condition of the James H. Cobb Park, named after the former town worker who died after suffering from heat stroke while working in the park.

Councilman Weeks mentioned that when the Bronson Youth League existed, James Cobb singlehandedly maintained the park. A member of the audience said that may be what killed Cobb.

For about four decades prior to the most recent decade of the BPR being in existence, sports in Bronson were guided by an organization known as the Bronson Youth League (BYL), which is similar to the still active Chiefland Area Athletic Association and the Williston Youth Athletic Association.

Years ago, however, when the BYL had such a breakdown of order that parents complained repeatedly to the Town Council, the town's leaders back then voted for the town government to take over parks and recreation – including organized sports.

Since then, Coach Stacy created a department that now serves 300 to 350 children, according to what he said Monday night.

If the costs are \$86,000 this year and there are 350 children served this year, then it costs about \$250 per-child per this year for this service, according to general math.

There was no resolution to the alleged deficit spending by the town's leaders on recreation.

Town Councilwoman Beatrice Roberts, however, is the single person of the five-member council who said she wants to keep the BPR. The other four did not voice a strong opinion, although Weeks seems inclined to want the government to surrender its job of providing recreational sports for youths – and to let the job return to whatever parents want to become involved as the next version of the BYL.

Roberts was active on Town Council when the BYL parents would, meeting after meeting, and in-between, complain to the town's leaders about how the BYL organization was being operated.

One possible option mentioned for increasing revenue to BPR is to have fundraisers, although that conversation was not carried to any conclusion.

Robbie Blake spoke about the history of the park, telling listeners that she came to the area 40 years ago. Through community efforts, including by her, Nancy Bell, Edith Brown and many others, enough money was generated to purchase the park land, which is now the largest city park in Levy County.

Councilman James Beck mentioned that he built bleachers, erected goalposts and his family has donated money to the BYL in the past.

Beck was not attempting to give him or his family recognition, he was simply answering Shane Schuler's question, which Schuler asked each Council member about how often he or she attended games at the park.

Attacking individual Council members, though, is among the points where decorum may be applied. In his question about attendance, Schuler did not address the actual job of the Town Council, to act as the trustees for the public property, to budget funds and to legislate to best serve all of the residents and visitors of Bronson.

Schuler did allude to his opinion that the Town Council members are unaware of the actual value to children and families and the town as a whole from children participating in organized sports, because Schuler thought the Town Council members had not watched enough of those games in Bronson to grasp that concept by watching those games.

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Internet café sought for Bronson



Bronson town councilwoman Beatrice Roberts is the only member of that group who said she would vote against gambling businesses in town. The other four need more information.

On another matter that had no resolution Monday night, was a request for a business license to open an Internet café in Bronson.

Bobby Patel of Chehar LLC said he wants to have a building where people gamble on an electronic game named Fish Tables. This is among the very same games that the municipal police agency in Chiefland closed because investigators found reasonable cause to suspect those games included the three elements in Florida law – chance, consideration and prize – to equal gambling.

In Chiefland, tens of thousands of dollars in cash was seized by the Chiefland Police Department in a one-night raid of eight Internet cafés. Machines were confiscated and stored, with some later being sold and the ones that were leased being returned to lease companies.

No person has been arrested from the Chiefland raids, though.

Councilwoman Roberts was the only member of the Bronson Town Council who clearly stated she would vote against allowing a gambling operation in the town.

Town Attorney Steven Warm asked Patel how this operation is different than the gambling that is not allowed in Florida.

Patel said this is like gambling at a casino. When asked if he had conducted market research to see if Bronson could support such a business, Patel intimated that people will come from surrounding towns and counties.

During the heyday of Internet cafés in Chiefland, people drove from Live Oak, Perry and other cities to gamble in Chiefland. Those gambling houses were open 24-hours-a-day.

Although Florida Statute 849.08 states “Gambling.—Whoever plays or engages in any game at cards, keno, roulette, faro or other game of chance, at any place, by any device whatever, for money or other thing of value, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor of the second degree,” there were no arrests from the Internet café raids in Chiefland.

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Bronson Mayor Partin said more research needs to be done before the town leaders would decide. Therefore, Fish Tables in Bronson was tabled. Perhaps, it will be on the agenda for the April 22 meeting, which is scheduled to start at 7 p.m.

Since Bronson has no municipal police force, it would be up to the Levy County Sheriff's Office to conduct an investigation after Patel opens his Fish Tables business, if the Town Council allows it to happen. If LCSO investigators found reasonable cause to believe an illegal gambling operation existed, then the LCSO could close the operation.

Meanwhile operators have learned to remove cash more frequently from Internet cafés – just in case there is a raid – thereby reducing the losses from police action.

In successful gambling businesses, the house wins.

An April 3, 2014 story in Florida Today (a daily newspaper on the East Coast of Florida) noted “State prosecutors said a series of raids carried out against two dozen Internet cafés statewide are the latest in a move to eliminate what authorities assert are illegal operations involving gambling and online arcades.

“The raids were conducted by Florida Department of Law Enforcement agents in five counties, Brevard, Duval, Columbia, Marion and Lake counties during the past two days and netted five arrests in Brevard County alone, authorities reported.”

Then-Attorney General Pam Bondi released a statement that the Florida Attorney General's Office of statewide prosecution would be active in halting what appeared to be illegal gambling in Florida.

As for Chiefland, Police Chief Scott Anderson told *HardisonInk.com* on Tuesday morning (April 16) that the Chiefland Police Department will not allow illegal gambling operations to reopen in Chiefland as long as he is chief.