

HOW WAS MONEY SPENT?

Holden Beach Board Plans Workshop On Occupancy Tax Fund

BY DOUG RUTTER

Holden Beach homeowners and real estate agents want to know how town officials have spent the occupancy tax money they've collected the last two years and how they plan to spend it this year.

Town Manager Gary Parker will set up a public workshop on the matter. But he said this week that the town has spent the tax money according to state law, which says it must be used for tourist-related expenses.

"The ways in which the town is using the money are perfectly OK," Parker said at Monday's town meeting. "I don't think there's any doubt about it."

Vacationers pay the occupancy or room tax to homeowners or real estate companies, who then pay it to the town. Holden Beach expects to receive about \$200,000 from the tax this fiscal year.

Parker said both the town attorney and officials with the N.C. League of Municipalities have reviewed Holden Beach's occupancy tax records. He also said the auditor would tell the town if it was doing something wrong.

Alan Holden, who owns a real estate company on the island, said agents would like to know how the money has been spent in the past and how it's been allocated this year.

"We're not questioning your integrity," Holden said. "We just want to know where it went."

He said real estate agents need the information so they can pass it on to the people who own the rental houses and the vacationers who rent the homes and pay the tax.

Last year, Holden said the people were told that some of the money would be used for sidewalks. The town budget included \$40,000 for sidewalks, but they were never built.

Reacting to Holden's comments, Mayor Pro Tem Gloria Barrett said the town's occupancy tax records are public and the town doesn't owe anyone a written report.

She accused the real estate developer of putting out a "propaganda sheet" which said the occupancy tax issue was a reason that only one commissioner was running for re-election in November.

But Holden isn't the only person interested in seeing how the occupancy tax money's been spent. Retired residents Don Pollard and John Broadnax also questioned how the dollars have been used.

Pollard said the town has been allocating some of its occupancy tax money for the police department, but the town has the same number of officers as it did in 1989 when it started collecting occupancy tax.

Parker suggested residents and real estate agents get more involved in the budget process if they're not happy with how occupancy tax revenues are allocated.

In the meantime, he said he would get information out to the real estate companies showing how the money was spent last year and what it was allocated for this year.

Commissioner Bob Buck admitted Monday night that the town has made at least one mistake handling its occupancy tax fund.

In the past, he said occupancy tax money

"We're not questioning your integrity. We just want to know where it went."

—Alan Holden

On occupancy tax funds

that wasn't spent went into the general fund balance at the end of the fiscal year instead of staying in the occupancy tax fund.

Canal Dredging

Despite earlier talk of coordinating a canal dredging project, several commissioners said Monday they're worried about the ability the town will have if it gets involved.

Parker said property owners groups in all three canal subdivisions at Holden Beach are presently getting signatures from landowners who willing to pay their share for the work.

They want the town to hire a dredging company and then assess landowners for the work. Parker said two of the canal areas only need the mouths dredged, and the other needs more extensive work.

But several commissioners said Monday night that dredging the canals could cause damage to docks and bulkheads and open the town up for a lawsuit.

"I'm gun shy as the devil," Commissioner Buck said.

Board member Judy Bryan said the town could get into "a lot of trouble" if it took on the project.

Commissioner Kenner Amos said the canals were built to accommodate small fishing boats. "We never intended to have a marina up and down those canals."

Amos said the canal property owner groups want the town to oversee the project because some people didn't pay the last time it was done.

Mrs. Barrett said she thinks the canal property owners should handle the work again and leave the town out of it.

Other Business

In other business Monday, commissioners:

■ Accepted the low bid of \$23,603 from MAC Construction of Shallotte for the paving of Shrimp and Salisbury streets. Commissioners also held a public hearing and decided to proceed with the paving of Burlington Street.

■ Voted to purchase an above-ground gasoline storage tank to replace the underground tank, as recommended by the town manager. Parker said the tank will cost about the same as buying gas from a service station in the long run. The initial cost will be between \$6,000 and \$7,000, and an architect's design will cost at least \$500.

■ Met in executive session for 20 minutes to discuss land acquisition. Mayor John Tandy said no action was taken.

■ Referred to the planning and zoning board

a proposal to raise the fee from \$35 to \$50 for appealing the building inspector's decision to the board of adjustment.

■ Voted to continue the town's membership in the Cape Fear Council of Governments. The annual dues are \$600, for which the town receives 20 hours of staff time.

■ Talked about building a sidewalk along Ocean Boulevard, but came to no decision on where it should be built or when work should begin. The town has to coordinate the construction with crews putting power and cable television lines underground. Holden Beach has enough money in this year's budget to build 5,000 feet of sidewalks.

■ Briefly discussed whether the town should try to save Hillside Drive from erosion. The ocean has been eating away lots on the south side of the street. Parker said the town has the option of building sandbag bulkheads if the ocean comes within 20 feet of the street.

■ Postponed action on a proposed ordinance that would require property owners to bulkhead canal lots before they are developed. The planning and zoning board is still working on the ordinance.

■ Heard from Parker that the town had to re-advertise for bids on a new public works garage after it only received two bids the first time around. The town is getting bids on both a "stick-built" and metal garage.

■ Accepted 100 blue reflectors as a gift from Tri-Beach Volunteer Fire Department. The reflectors, which were donated to the fire department, will be attached to fire hydrants on the island.

Health Board Resets Meeting

The Brunswick County Board of Health failed to reach a quorum for its regular meeting Monday night.

Chairman Bill Rabon rescheduled the meeting for Monday, Sept. 16, at 7:30 p.m., because just three of the 11 board members were present.

On the agenda is a discussion of a proposed seafood inspection ordinance, to be presented by Environmental Health Specialist Gary McDonald. The ordinance is aimed at inspecting and licensing fresh seafood vendors in Brunswick County in a move to protect the public's health.

District 3 County Commissioner Gene Pinkerton last month asked the board to consider such an ordinance. He also told commissioners last week that he had asked the health board to explore the issue.

McDonald, whose supervisor's position was eliminated by county commissioners in June, has rejoined the department as an environmental health specialist. Two health specialists later resigned from the department following the county budget cuts.

On a 3-2 vote, McDonald's position was eliminated, leaving the 10-year veteran of the department without a job.

Health Director Michael Rhodes on Monday also congratulated Mary McCarley of Long Beach, who has been certified by the state as a registered health specialist, trained to make on-site soil evaluations.

Presently, the department has a backlog of 184 applications for on-site soil tests for new septic systems, said John Crowder, environmental health supervisor.

Of those applicants, 44 have been waiting four weeks or longer, he said.

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Local Students Receive Honors

Seven Brunswick County residents received academic honors during the summer quarter at Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington.

Five local students were named to the president's list for earning straight A's. They are Ruby S. Casanova of Winnabow, Eileen T. Erickson of Ocean Isle Beach, Ivey A. Hollis and Mitch R. Lanier of Leland, and Alan M. Shirley of Southport.

Students named to the dean's list for earning a grade point average of 3.5 or better with no grade below C were Angela D. Butler of Leland and Lindell Randolph Jr. of Bolivia.

Completes Training

U.S. Navy Fireman Apprentice Billy D. Inman recently completed training at Recruit Training Command, Naval Training Center, San Diego.

He is the son of Shelton D. and Martha A. Inman of Route 2, Ash, and is a 1988 graduate of West Brunswick High School in Shallotte. He joined the Navy in March 1991.

Peedin Is Promoted

U.S. Marine Lance Cpl. John R. Peedin has been promoted to his present rank while serving with 1st Marine Division, Camp Pendleton, Calif.

The son of Darine S. and John R. Peedin Sr. of Long Beach, the former Smithfield resident joined the Marine Corps in September 1990.

Arrives For Duty

Air Force Airman Christine T. Cretton, an apprentice personnel specialist, has arrived for duty at Grissom Air Force Base, Ind.

She is the daughter of William T. and Janice Cretton of Boiling Spring Lakes and is a 1989 graduate of South Brunswick High School.

Rural Areas Face Expensive Water Projects

BY TERRY POPE

Rural communities that have gone shopping for county water recently are finding few bargains.

"A lot of them want the water, they just don't like the method," said Jerry Webb, Brunswick County Public Utilities director. "They don't want to pay for it."

The remaining communities that can be served from the county's existing water lines are not as heavily populated as previous Special Assessment Districts (SADs). The fewer the homes served in an SAD, the higher the cost for each home.

SADs are areas where property owners are assessed the cost of extending water lines from main distribution lines into adjoining neighborhoods.

About 200 people attended a community meeting held Friday to discuss the next round of SADs, planned for five communities from Bolivia to Winnabow. About 650 residents had been invited, said Webb.

The majority in attendance said they were against the SADs, he said.

If some communities decide they do not want county water, the cost will continue to increase for those who do.

"We'd like to do it as one project," said Webb. "If some choose they do not want the water, it wouldn't be cost effective for us to go into those other areas."

The Brunswick County Utility Operations Board voted Monday to ask county commissioners to set a public hearing on SAD 19, to determine if residents there still want water.

That SAD will include Green Hill Road, Cherry Tree Road, Crabapple Road, Governor's Road, Zion Church Road, Town Creek Road, Old Town Creek Road, Maco Road to Oak View Estates, Snowfield Road and Goodland Drive. These Winnabow and Town Creek communities can tap onto the main line on U.S. 17.

Approximately 572 parcels of land can be served in this SAD, said Webb.

Residents who oppose the project

say they don't understand why it wasn't funded through revenue bonds and why residents on the main distribution line on U.S. 17 were not assessed.

"Those issues come up at every meeting," said Webb. "There may be a time when customers on U.S. 17 will get a bill. It's being discussed."

UOB Attorney Michael Ramos advised that a public hearing should be held for each SAD, rather than a single hearing for all of the areas now under discussion. UOB members appeared hesitant over which area to take to a hearing first before deciding on the Town Creek and Winnabow community.

Also included in the next round of SADs are Piney Grove Road, Randolphville Road, Alternative School Road and Mill Creek Road, near Bolivia.

Preliminary cost estimates were given before combining areas into one or two SADs to help cut costs. Those estimates ranged from \$2,335 per home at Oak View Estates to \$1,879 per home along Town Creek and Zion Church roads. The

Governor's Road project would cost an estimated \$3,495 per home, based on those early figures.

Shell Point resident Bob Black, who has gathered petitions in his community from people who want county water, has asked the board if Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) loans are not available for such projects.

A \$998,000 FmHA grant was awarded to a tri-county area near Dillon, S.C., in July, Black said, to expand the regional water system there.

"The money's out there," said Black. "Perhaps someone should look into these grants."

The county's median income level is too high to qualify, said Webb. "We've been told in the past that Brunswick County could not meet the requirements," said Webb. "I know Farmer's Home has been looked into before."

Shell Point's median income isn't typical of the county's, Black said.

That area cannot become a SAD until a main line is extended there through a capital improvements project.

"Civictown is not an affluent area," he added.

UOB member Robert Nubel said he is concerned about the smaller SADs that are now under consideration.

"Petitions are fine," Nubel said, "but keep in mind what the mandate is—to serve the maximum number of people."

If the smaller SADs and other communities do not join forces in favor of water, then all areas will hurt, he said.

"Once some are eliminated," said Nubel, "the cost skyrockets."

In other business Monday, the UOB:

■ Voted to recommend that A.D. McLamb and Son Construction Co. of Thomasboro receive the contract for installing water lines in SAD 12 at a cost of \$241,473. SAD 12 is a collection of 10 subdivisions between Ocean Isle and Calabash. The board will ask county commissioners to give Carmichael Construction Co. a contract for providing service taps, at a cost of \$103,900. Both were low figures from four companies that submitted bids.

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