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ongoing problems with broken furniture, late-night parties, loud music and unruly children. "I appreciate that we want tourism and visitors to be here and for businesses to keep going but not at the expense of the permanent homeowners," she said.

Referring to Loeffgren's suggestion that the rule be waived only during the summer months, Blair added, "The summer is when the permanent residents are here and we're the ones who are objecting to this."

Local resident Reina Bertram took the business owners to task over their assertion that they need help maintaining their profit margins in order to stay in business. "It appears to me that retailers and Realtors think it's our responsibility to keep their businesses running," she said. "They knew what it was like before they opened their business. Please do not turn our residential streets and neighborhoods into a rental free-for-all."

Harry Christensen, owner of Harry's Continental Kitchens, pointed out that just as some residents were already living on the Key when there was no 30-day rule, many current businesses were already in operation as well. He said that before the rule went into effect in 1982, many residences were owned by people living in the region who rented out their second homes during season. Those property owners then spent the summers in their Longboat vacation homes, bringing their recreational dollars with them. Now, he says, people have sold their homes because of the inflexible rental options. "People aren't going to come out here and try to open and succeed in business when it's so seasonal that it's inconsistent," said Christensen. "(Relaxing the 30-day rule) isn't the only option, but every little thing helps."

Peggy Goodrich, a longtime resident of Longboat Key, set aside her prepared notes and spoke directly to the business owners in the audience. Visibly angered, she said, "I have supported your businesses for 30 years and I'm very upset at what's being forced down our throats. This proposal will help businesses at the expense of residents." She said that she would continue to support local businesses in any way she could but thinks the rules should be modified in commercial areas only.

Goodrich also said that many business owners in favor of relaxing the 30-day rule will be unaffected by the change because they live in deed restricted areas where the rule would not apply. "The few neighborhoods that will be affected are at the mercy of the board," she said.

A suggestion was made by George Minnitti, a member of the board of directors for the Longboat Key Chamber,

that one way to maintain the integrity of the rental arrangements of residential units was to keep rental fees high enough to encourage the type of clientele renters are hoping to have.

"I wonder why this is being addressed now, when so many homeowners have left for the summer," asked Longboat resident Patricia Zunz. She called the idea of relaxing the 30-day rule "unfair" and asked what the hotel occupancy rate is currently. "It seems like the rates are down so by putting residences into the pool, what are you hoping to accomplish?"

Clarifications, Suggestions, Opinions

Before opening up the matter for board discussion, Gilbert took a moment to answer Zunz's question about the timing of the discussion. "There is nothing sinister about the timing of this. It came about because of the timing of the visioning process, not because of the chamber, Planning and Zoning or the Commission," said Gilbert. "It's time to move or not move on this. The timing was not contrived."

Board Vice-Chairman Jim Brown opened the discussion, saying he wouldn't support changing the 30-day rule but would consider to a provision allowing for condos and homeowners associations to decide for themselves if they would like to waive the rental restrictions and petition the board accordingly.

Arends said that she was "not convinced this would be a panacea. Allowing some associations to have permission (to relax the rule) has been done before." She went on to say, "It seems like that may not be enough and you're pinning a lot of hope that things will work out."

The idea of allowing voters to decide if commercial businesses should be allowed to be zoned residential or mixed-use was offered by board member John Kerwin, who was also not in favor of a blanket change to the 30-day rule. Board member George Symanski said it was up to the Planning and Zoning Board to make zoning decisions, not the voters.

Symanski did agree, however, with the suggestion made by board member Walter Hackett to offer incentives to business owners that would preserve or enhance commercial businesses. Hackett said he supported Brown's idea of allowing individual associations to make their own residential unit rental rules.

In response to board member Allen Hixon's request for a monthly breakdown of current hotel occupancy rates, Chamber President Gail Loeffgren told the board that there is no data available yet for 2006. She added that both Manatee and Sarasota counties attempt to track the information yearly but "hoteliers won't share their occupancy rates very often." Even with a blind survey, Loeffgren the return rate of statistics from hoteliers is very low.

"There's definitely some problems and they definitely need some help," said Gilbert about the businesses on Longboat Key. He said that relaxing the 30-day rule would have the same impact on him as it would on other homeowners but that he would be willing to consider a trial period. Gilbert acknowledged that he didn't think his neighbors would be amenable to the idea. "The problem is that I'm willing to do it but no one else seems to be," said Gilbert.

Gilbert went on to say, "Residents have legitimate fears. They are there and they're universal. There wasn't any resident (who spoke today) who said 'go for it.' Maybe Peggy (Goodrich) was right, leave residents alone and they'll support businesses attempts to grow."

Public Debate Continues

Longboat Key Chamber of Commerce chairman Andrew Vac took the podium next as discussion was once again opened to the public. "In-season, there are 25,000 people here. Off-season, there are 7,500. That's a big difference," said Vac. He said that since the Holiday Inn and other hoteliers have left the Key, nightly rental units are down 27%. "We've lost a huge factor of people who can come here because of current restrictions. We've limited our ability to bring people here. This is a visioning process and we need to plan for the future of Longboat Key," he said. "We have a situation...that is moving in the wrong direction instead of the right direction."

A resident speaking from the audience called out to Vac, "if you can't fill the vacant units now, why make us pay for it?"

Vac answered that people would be more likely to visit the Key in search of a single-family home with all its amenities if they were able to rent it for less than a month at a time. "Just try it," said Vac, referring to the two or three year trial period suggested earlier in the meeting.

Chairman Gilbert called on Bill Flinter to address the group and offer his opinion on the issue. "If you open the door an inch, the door will blow wide open," he said. Flinter vehemently added that businesses make good money in-season and that should allow them to plan for expenses off-season. "We like our peace and quiet and we're willing to support the businesses that are here," he said, "but don't inflict your burden on us because you can't make a sufficient amount of money."

Marine Matarese of RE/MAX Excellence, got the last word, and a round of applause from her colleagues, as public comments drew to a close. "This is discussion only and the residents aren't wrong in how you feel," she said. "We just want to show you that businesses here have problems that can't be fixed by (better) management. We do care about you. Please leave in a spirit of togetherness, not 'us against them.' Please leave today in a spirit of hopeful anticipation."

The Decision

The discussion came full circle as the board pondered how to address the concerns of both residents and local business owners. Symanski pointed out that this issue was just part of the Visioning Process that gives the board the opportunity to reexamine several things of importance to the Town "Just because we brought it up doesn't mean we're going to do it," he said.

In the end, the board voted unanimously to make no changes to the 30-day minimum occupancy requirement and send no recommendation to the Town Commission. "We will continue to talk with the chamber about strategies to make Longboat Key as good as it can be. But we're not doing anything with the 30-day rule because of the concerns of the public," said Gilbert.

Longboat Key News

5370 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Suite 210
Longboat Key, FL 34228
Phone: 941-387-2200
Fax: 941-387-8288
www.lbknews.com

Editor and Publisher - Steve Reid
sreid@lbknews.com

Associate Publisher - Melissa Reid

Vice President Sales/Marketing
Christopher Berloni

Production Manager - Caron Cooper

Office Manager - Mary Cohen

Advertising Executives
Linda Browning • Nan Kirk

Travel Editors
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Staff Writers
Melissa Reid • Lisa Hoover
Melissa Donley

Contributing Columnists
Dick Hershatter • Tom Burgum
Peter Holliday • Al Green
Glenn & Carole Swope

Graphic Design
Jerry Maguire • Caron Cooper

Newsroom
news@lbknews.com

Letters to the Editor
letters@lbknews.com

Advertising Department
ads@lbknews.com
941-749-0400

To send digital artwork
ads@lbknews.com

LongboatLetters

Courting Resurfacing Solutions

Dear Editor,

I am writing to first thank Lisa Hoover for her article "Courting Controversy" in the last issue of Longboat Key News. It was well written and showed both sides of the issue. This brings me to the other reasons for my letter. The article contained some comments from Friends of Tennis and the managers of the Tennis Center.

First, Mr. Schlorff states the Tennis Center has operated on a break even basis for eight years (my recollection is the first year the Tennis Center lost money.) Mr. Schlorff continues that now they have no money for "extras." This seemingly implies resurfacing is an extra. Mr. Schlorff and Mr. Warachek have a tremendous amount of experience in tennis. I'm sure they must have realized that the Tennis Center courts would need to be resurfaced at some point in time after installation. Why did they not plan for this when they established the user fee rates? Resurfacing Har-True tennis courts is a routine part of maintaining any Har-True tennis facility. This is not an "extra." The fact Mr. Schlorff states that they have no money for "extras," in my opinion, proves that the Tennis Center user fees are too low. Raise the rates, this will pay not only for this year's project; but will allow them to create a reserve that will pay for future "extras." Rather

than returning to the taxpayers continually.

Ms. Thayer says that the Tennis Center should be treated like any other Town Department. I agree! Let's use the example of the Water Department. Currently the water system is under going an upgrade. Mr. St. Dennis raised water rates in order to cover the costs. This was the fairest way as users pay for the upgrades as they will be the ones benefiting the most. Those who use the most water pay the most. Simple.

The last issue I wish to discuss is the Commissioners consideration of \$45,000 traffic study. This seems excessive for a 10 mile long, two-lane road. The traffic problems both north and south are once we cross over either bridge. The traffic at the height of tourist season going either off the island or returning back to the island is the main problem. We could put tolls at each end of the island (like Boca Grande) and this would surely decrease the drive through traffic greatly. However, this would have almost no effect on the greater problem. Spending \$45,000 to study traffic between the two bridges seems frivolous. What next, \$50,000 to study whether or not we can prevent the tide from coming in? Commissioners, please!

Keith Bozza
Longboat Key