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Tybee Island kills shore protection act

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Tybee Island government turned into bare-knuckle politics Thursday night.

By the time it was over, in split votes, the City Council had agreed to repeal its Shore Protection Act and reduce the number of members on its Planning Commission from nine to seven.

The planning vote brought out public speakers who openly questioned the council's motives, in part because the original proposal drafted by City Attorney Bubba Hughes called for the current commission to be abolished and seven new members appointed. It was presented to the Planning Commission in July for a preliminary vote that would be forwarded to council.

That raised suspicion that the new council, brought to power in November elections and perceived as pro-development, was making a play to establish a commission molded to its liking.

Hughes said it was his intention to create a draft ordinance that listed several options, including abolishment. He could not explain, he said, why his draft proposal included only abolishment. Proposed ordinance changes will now be reviewed by the council before he submits them to any advisory commission for a vote, he said.

Before calling for the vote on slimming down the Planning Commission, Mayor Jason Buelterman, who votes only in the event of a tie, questioned the need for the reduction.

"I just don't understand what the root cause is," he said. "I don't understand why we are creating yet another divide" in our community.

Councilman Charlie Brewer, who suggested the change, said he did so to make the city government more efficient. The commission will have the same number of members as the council, he added.

Council approved 4-2, with Paul Wolff and Barry Brown opposed.

The Shore Protection Act was presented to the council as an effort to fine-tune its existing ordinance. Generally, the city's plan divided the shoreline into three areas and mandated that construction could not occur within 10 feet of a dune closest to shore, within 18 feet of a seawall, or - in the absence of either - within 250 feet of the ordinary high-water mark.

The city's ordinance provides for an added level of protection above the state guidelines and is especially important in trying to keep construction from advancing ever closer to the water, Buelterman said.

Council members and several residents had questions on certain aspects of the proposal, including a section that would restrict whether a home could be rebuilt if it sustained more than 80 percent damage.

As the vote was called for, Councilman Ed Crone made a motion to "repeal every bit of" the city's ordinance and revert back to the state.

Wolff urged the council not to support the motion, saying it would be a "giant step backward" and "would not be in the best interests of the citizens of Tybee."

But Crone's motion carried, 4-2, with Wolff and Councilman Dick Smith dissenting.

Hughes advised the council not to immediately repeal the ordinance, but to keep it in place until he could present a new proposal, which would be offered publicly and voted on twice.

After the vote, Crone said the city had been struggling with the ordinance for at least the last five years.

"Let the state handle it," he said. "They ain't going to let them do anything wrong."

One resident, Cullin Chambers, said repealing the Shore Protection Act and moving to more tightly control the Planning Commission, as well as the council's recent efforts to repeal an ethics ordinance in place for just more than a year, signaled the new council's disregard for the citizen input behind each effort.

"Something is wrong here," Chambers said. "We are tired of a government that no longer represents its people. ...You're not saving us money. You're costing us the public trust."

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