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Tybee conservationists worry new council means more development

By Christian Livermore
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Conservationists are reeling in the wake of election results on Tybee Island, where developer-friendly candidates won all but one seat Tuesday on the City Council.

Many are worried the new council will approve development that will damage Tybee's character and environment, but the incoming council members say people have nothing to fear.

Conservationists cite donations the candidates received from developers, their respective professions and, in some cases, their voting records as evidence of their pro-development bona fides.

"During the forums, we've already heard candidates say that they would do away with Tybee's shore-protection line, heard them criticize the acquisition of green space, so I think that developers will have a much freer rein on the island," said council member Kathryn Williams, who lost her bid for a new term in Tuesday's municipal election. "I would anticipate we will see an increase in variance requests, and I think a lot of those will be received much more favorably from council without proving hardship."

Still, the winners themselves have maintained throughout the campaign they are not pro-development but simply pro-property rights.

"I think we've gotten a bad rap about being pro-development, but that's OK. We'll just have to prove that that's not true," said council member Wanda Doyle, who garnered the highest number of votes in Tuesday's election. "I think (voters) want to find a balance where they feel like we're protecting people's property rights, but we're also protecting the environment."

The concerns

Two of Tuesday's election winners are in real estate: Barry Brown is a builder, Dick Smith is a broker.

Real estate professionals contributed to the campaigns of others.

Developers Bobby Chu and Lou Kietzman donated to Councilman Eddie Crone's campaign, while associate broker Bonnie Gaster gave to Wanda Doyle, according to campaign disclosure reports.

And the developer-friendly winners, whether on the City Council or the planning commission, have voted frequently in favor of development and building variances.

Conservationists worry the new council will allow developments blocked by the previous council - projects they project would over-populate the island, put a strain on its resources, including water supply, and harm the environment.

They point to a request by Kietzman for a variance to the city's Shore Protection Act so he could build two houses on the Battery Backus portion of historic Fort Screven.

The outgoing council, including Doyle, denied the variance. Crone, however, voted in favor. And some people are worried Kietzman's request is exactly the kind of variance the new council might approve.

Another example is a request from Michael Godbee for a variance to get access to his property, which officials say is marshland and therefore unsuitable for development. The council denied the variance by a 4-2 vote. Doyle and Crone voted for the variance.

Crone said people are worrying needlessly about the new council.

"It's not going to affect development one way or the other," he said. "We've got building codes. We've got ordinances. If they follow the building code and the ordinances and they architect the house to fit the lot that they've got, there's going to be no difference."

Alone at the table

For Councilman Paul Wolff, who barely won re-election and will be the lone conservationist on the council, the next two years could be lonely. Wolff could find himself on the losing end of a lot of 5-1 votes.

He hopes development will be reined in by measures the outgoing council enacted, including a 25-foot marsh buffer in which nothing can be constructed, a water conservation program, a curbside recycling program and a limit on the number of units per lot in the C-1 district to decrease the number of condominiums.

Even so, Wolff has his doubts.

"These guys can come in and reverse this stuff overnight," he said. "I suspect the people who were denied variances are going to come back, and they're going to be in a much better position to have their variances approved at the expense of the environment."

As for developers, they are pleased with the new council but don't think it will lead to more development, Chu said.

"This new council is going to use common sense and look at each individual development on each individual merit. I don't think they're going to do anything outside what's in the text amendment right now," Chu said. "I guess I couldn't ask for anything better. I'm happy."

Stuck in the middle are residents hoping for the best but sometimes fearing the worst.

"I'm worried that a lot of developments will be approved now that wouldn't have been before," said voter Chip Zulliger. "I'm concerned that as in the past, candidates may be misrepresenting themselves. I can only hope that it's not true."

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