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Civic association membership open

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The Greater Pine Island Civic Association has changed its decision to bar membership applicants who have opposing views or are in litigation against the land use plan.

After conceding that its bylaws do call for open membership, the civic association is again taking applications from Pine Island homeowners and residents wishing to join.

"Applications will be accepted if the person is a homeowner or resident of Pine Island and the check is written on the applicant's own account," GPICA vice president Pat Blackwell said Wednesday.

The policy of limiting the membership was brought up at the last meeting on March 2, when 36 residents' applications were rejected because board members believed they were trying to take over the civic association or because the applicants were in litigation against the land use plan.

Residents opposed to amendments of the 1989 Lee County comprehensive land use plan have requested an administrative hearing so a judge can decide whether the amendments, approved in February 2003, should be adopted.

Commissioners have postponed the hearing indefinitely until they receive findings from an economic impact study. The study should be completed later this month or by early May.

Civic association board members said they rejected the applications because the majority of the applicants chose to pay for the membership in a lump sum check, instead of separate checks at \$10 each.

The \$345 check was submitted by member and landowner Edd Dean, who opposes the land use plan. About 11 of the 36 applications submitted by Dean came from Pine Island real estate agent Ken Cox's Century 21 company.

This change, back to the original policy of open membership, appears to have been prompted after Fort Myers attorney Steve Carta was retained by Dean and requested open membership.

Dean is not so sure whether the civic association will actually accept any new members.

"They said they will be 'taking in the applications,' they did not say if they would accept them," Dean said. "I think it's still the same old spin. By saying now they will 'accept members' makes it look like they were preventing people from joining, which was my point in the first place when I argued about the applications being rejected."

Cox, a longtime resident of Pine Island, felt slighted when he found out people from his office were rejected. He sent an e-mail on March 15 to member Phil Buchanan, who is the civic association's consulting attorney.

Buchanan returned his e-mail saying: "Individual checks or a group check does not matter, but the membership applications really should be voluntary."

Cox, who has wanted to stay out of the battle over the land use plan, is not sure the current civic association is working for the betterment of the island.

"We currently have a civic association in Matlacha and one in St. James City," Cox said. "Why do we have yet another that tries to represent all? I know that each community has its own personality and therefore has its own agenda. If we add a Bokeelia Civic Association then each community would have representation for its own needs."

UNDER FIRE

IF YOU GO

- **What:** The Greater Pine Island Civic Association general meeting
- **When:** 7 p.m. Tuesday
- **Where:** The Elks Lodge at Pine Island Center
- **Details:** Voting to take place on releasing membership names. County commissioner Bob Janes is guest speaker.

Tuesday's Greater Pine Island Civic Association meeting may prove to be one of the most contentious to date.

Emotions are still running high from the March 2 meeting. Angry words were exchanged and a move to have the civic association board step down was made, but denied.

Buchanan sent an e-mail asking all the members to show up Tuesday because he felt the land use plan and the association were in jeopardy of being eliminated. This is the last meeting before the association goes on hiatus for the summer.

One resident looks forward to the first Tuesday of the month.

"I love these meetings. They are exciting, especially with the Fourth of July so far away," realtor Mike Shevlin said laughing.

Shevlin, a 30-year resident of Pine Island, moved from Fort Myers Beach in the 1970s. He was a president of the civic association in 1985. He says much has changed since then.

"In all seriousness, it seems a lot like mob rule when you go to some of these meetings," Shevlin said. "As it stands now, I don't think people really feel that welcome at the meetings unless they are totally for the land use plan."

He added, "and with all this stuff going on, I am not sure if you came to a meeting you would be able to express your concerns or be heard."

The majority of the people who oppose the amendments to the comprehensive land use plan have problems with the "coastal rural" amendment, which forces large landowners who wish to develop their land in the future, to cluster homes in 30 percent of the acreage and restore the rest to native flora.

"Generally I like the plan, my only concerns are with minor points like about the types of roofs you can have on new businesses," Shevlin said. "And I don't like the idea of clustering. That's just like Fort Myers."

Cox likes the existing 1989 plan without the amendments.

"The existing plan has a lot of good features. It also has a lot of emotion attached," Cox said. "I don't know if it can be redone or corrected enough to take away the bitterness that some now feel. Maybe we will have to start over."

He added, "other communities in Florida have plans that are in place and are working. Have we visited these plans? For a lot of us that are now getting involved we have the same questions the GPICA had three years ago. The good news is this time there will be more input from the island population."

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