

Absences overshadow joint meeting of Naples council and Collier commissioners

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NAPLES — Commissioner Tom Henning couldn't chime in about beach renourishment during a joint workshop Wednesday between Collier County Commissioners and Naples City Council members.

Commissioner Georgia Hiller wasn't able to comment about a proposal for the county to contribute more money for city parks.

And Naples Councilwoman Teresa Heitmann couldn't share her opinions about these and other items on the agenda.

That's because the elected officials were absent from the first meeting of the two boards in City Council chambers in four years.

Those who were in attendance took notice before taking up any other items on the agenda.

"I'm a little disappointed we don't have a full quorum today," Naples Mayor Bill Barnett said to commissioners, council members, and city and county staff Wednesday. "Had we known, we would have changed the date of this meeting." Heitmann, who is the chairwoman of the Florida League of Cities environment and energy committee, was in Washington, D.C. meeting with elected officials. Heitmann, when reached by phone Wednesday morning, said it was important for her to attend the league meeting.

Both Hiller and Henning said they accepted invitations to the Cato Institute's Naples Policy Perspective before the joint meeting was on the calendar. City Manager Bill Moss said he was informed the two commissioners wouldn't be able to attend the meeting Feb. 8. Barnett said he knew for a couple of weeks that Heitmann wouldn't be able to attend. Using the Cato Institute's event as an excuse wasn't good enough for at least one council member.

"(It) shows a complete dereliction of duty," said Councilman Sam Saad. "I was at Cato and thought it was very important to go. I stayed for all the speeches (except the last one) ... but I made it to the meeting." Both Henning and Hiller in separate interviews said they received an invitation to the event before the joint meeting was on the calendar.

"This was scheduled long before the BCC meeting," Hiller said. "I had made a commitment to come here."

Hiller and Henning both said they informed county staff they would not be able to attend the meeting, and Hiller passed along two memos that County Manager Leo Ochs read into record Wednesday. Hiller said she didn't learn of the meeting until Jan. 28.

"They failed to give significant notice, and we all have a very packed schedule," Hiller said.

But Ochs said commissioners have known since Dec. 14 that a meeting was in the works, and since Jan. 11, at the latest, that the meeting had been scheduled for Wednesday.

Ochs, according to a recap of the Jan. 11 meeting, informed commissioners of the meeting during the general communications portion of the meeting.

Ian Mitchell, executive manager for the Collier County commission, said the joint meeting appeared on the calendar on Jan. 31.

The two-hour meeting focused on several issues including increased funding for the city's parks and recreation programs and beach renourishment.

While council members on Wednesday initially requested an additional \$700,000 toward parks, recreation and beach facilities within city limits, that request was quickly put on the back burner after commissioners said they weren't in the position to give any more money.

Commissioner Jim Coletta said the county was going to be faced with making a minimum of 3 percent in cuts in the coming year, and the city had to do whatever it takes to make itself whole.

Coletta suggested the city look at a tiered user fee structure for park users who aren't city residents, but the two boards came to a consensus that before major decisions regarding fee structures were made they should evaluate services offered by the city and county.

"As a consumer that consumes these parks, I think we can find some efficiencies and overlaps," said Councilman Gary Price.

Commissioners and council members directed County Manager Leo Ochs and City Manager Bill Moss to have their

respective staffs analyze services, and who uses each facility, and report back within 90 days.

The discussion moved quickly from parks and recreation programs to beach renourishment, with both boards agreeing to push the Department of Environmental Protection to loosen its policies against putting groins or jetties on the beach to slow erosion.

Commission Chairman Fred Coyle broached the subject after Councilman John Sorey raised concerns that the county would not have enough money to put more sand on the beach after the planned renourishment in 2013. We replace it (sand), it washes away," Coyle said. "We replace it, it washes away. It's not working."

Instead, Coyle said, the city and the county should come up with projects that would save money by extending the life of a renourished beach from 8-10 years to 20-25 years.

Coyle said he hoped the county would have an ally in new Gov. Rick Scott, who has ordered a review of state bureaucracy.

"We're moving toward a more sensible government, I hope," Coyle said.

Sorey afterward said he planned to ask for a meeting with new DEP Secretary Herschel Vinyard to discuss new approaches to stop beach erosion.

"It's just been off the table but maybe in this new reality (it will be back on)," Sorey said.

Using structures on the beach to stop erosion would have “significant issues with us,” Conservancy of Southwest Florida President Andrew McElwaine said.

He said groins and jetties often cause more problems than they solve by interrupting the natural drift of sand along the shoreline.

“We would be very concerned,” McElwaine said.

The two boards also discussed the city’s proposal to convert a portion of Goodlette-Frank Road into U.S. 41 as a bypass to downtown. All agreed the both sides should continue to look into the feasibility of the proposal, and see whether it is a viable option.

Coyle said afterward that it was a “great meeting” and the two boards should “do it more often.”

The last time the two boards met in City Council chambers was in 2006.

But while many of those in attendance said they were pleased with how the meeting turned out, the absences hung over the meeting.

“We get together once every four years and this is something that should be important to everyone that we sit down at the table at least as a group that represents (Naples and Collier County),” Barnett said.

Henning said his decision not to go wasn’t an intentional snub, and hoped the city and county would be able to better coordinate future meetings.

“I think it’s a very important workshop ...” he said.

And while Coyle said he couldn’t comment on his colleagues’ decisions, he thought everyone should have “made an attempt to be there.”

Staff writer Ryan Mills contributed to this story.

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