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Tybee council wants more work on ethics

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Tybee Island City Attorney Bubba Hughes is being given a lot of credit for helping write an ethics ordinance the Tybee City Council approved last year.

Thursday night, he introduced a proposed amendment that would throw the whole thing out.

The amendment calls for a new, more streamlined ordinance. It also does away with language that bars a council member from voting on issues involving people who contribute more than \$500 to council candidates' political campaigns.

That aspect of the ordinance previously tripped up the council when five of six members faced recusal on a zoning variance because they had accepted about \$750 of in-kind contributions from the developer asking for the variance.

Three of the council members - Eddie Crone, Dick Smith and Charlie Brewer, who were elected in November - were not serving when the ordinance was approved in 2007.

At a January council meeting, an item seeking to suspend or repeal the ordinance was placed on the agenda. No council member would take credit for putting it there. And when a motion was made to repeal the ordinance, it died for lack of a second.

Council members asked Hughes to suggest changes, which he brought back Thursday night.

He pointed out using campaign contributions as grounds for recusal was a unique aspect of Tybee's ordinance, and that its overall comprehensiveness "was pretty unique."

The new ordinance was a discussion-only item Thursday, but it proved to be the talk of the night.

Formal discussion didn't begin until about 10:20 p.m., but two speakers hours earlier in the meeting used

the public forum to urge the council to keep the current ordinance.

"The wisest and most responsible thing is to stay the course for this wonderful document that the people of Tybee Island developed," said Pam O'Brien, a Tybee resident who was on the committee to write the current ordinance. She earned a round of applause.

Hours later, Mayor Jason Buelterman voiced his concern about disregarding the work of Tybee's citizens.

"I'd hate to see us pitch something that so many people worked so hard on," he said.

Council members approved a motion by Brewer to return the ordinance to the ethics commission. His hope was that members would come up with a simpler overall ordinance but use the current, more comprehensive ordinance to develop a workbook to provide more in-depth ethics training.

Councilman Crone opposed the motion. Councilman Paul Wolff was absent. All others voted to approve.

In other action, the council also:

Voted to allocate \$622,000 in city funds for beach renourishment. It will be used to complement a \$960,000 federal allocation.

Suspended the Economic Development Committee. That decision ties into a larger city initiative, called the Better Hometown Committee, which will take on economic development and tourist initiatives. A board of directors will be appointed for that committee. Its members will be nominated to and approved by the council.

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