

'Bankrollers to End Homelessness'

It may not be the adopted title, but it describes the gathering of civic, business and governmental leaders Tuesday morning in the continuing development of a plan to end homelessness in St. Johns County.

"We're not governmental, and we're not stakeholders," Mayor Joe Boles said in opening the session. "We're bankrollers, because it's costing us more to ignore homelessness. We're here to motivate the community to invest in ending it."

Michael German

Michael German, southeast regional coordinator for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, reprised a presentation given to an audience of 150 here last summer, stressing that a new, business approach to assisting the homeless and reducing its high costs resulted in a nationwide ten percent reduction in homelessness between 2005 and 2007. Case in point: an aggressive program in Denver resulted in a savings of \$20 million, which is being reinvested in permanent housing and services for the homeless.

Businesswoman Holly Yelton will be chairing future group meetings, and the agenda will include finding a name for the initiative.

Economy grows our homeless count

German's optimistic 2005-2007 survey didn't reflect the more recent economic collapse. The recent St. Johns Homeless Coalition survey found 1,368 homeless persons here, up ten percent from last year's 1,238. Helping fuel the increase: 2,345 foreclosures in St. Johns County in 2008, compared to 1,049 in 2007 and 641 in 2006.

Nolan Honored

Historian David **David Nolan** will be given the Governor's Points of Light Award February 23 by Mayor Joe Boles, on behalf of Governor Charlie Crist.

The award recognizes Floridians who demonstrate exemplary volunteer service to their community. Nolan has focused on our city's history for the past 25 years.

Commissioners tackle fares & fees

City Commissioners Monday approved a half percent increase in franchise fees paid by Old Town Trolleys and Sightseeing Trains, in a regular meeting which also heard a cab company urging a change in the city-approved fare system.

The sightseeing businesses have been paying a 2½ percent fee on ticket sales under a franchise agreement approved by our City Commission in 2001, which limits fee increases to a half percent every three years.

Last year the companies paid \$119,140.08 on sales of \$4,765,603.30. The 3 percent rate will increase city revenue by \$23,828.02, based on last year's figures. State law allows franchise fees up to 5%.

Monday's meeting also included pleas to support a "downtown reunion" and to include our city's black history on the city web site, approval of plans to dredge the Salt Run Channel, and an increase in historic preservation property tax exemption from 5 to ten years.

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Franchise fee increased

Despite a weak economy, Old Town Trolleys and Sightseeing Trains showed an increase of \$500,000 in sales in 2008, with ridership up from 240,025 to 240,658, according to figures submitted to the city. They're rolling neck and neck in sales, according to the figures, with Old Town Trolleys grossing \$2.5 million and Sightseeing Trains \$2.2 million last year.

The franchise fees help defray nearly \$2 million the city spends annually supporting our tourism, with expenses including additional restrooms, street, park, and police services, and subsidy to our Colonial Spanish Quarter. Costs not covered by various fees come from property tax revenue.

"Why not charge our cabs and other services a fee as well?" Mayor Joe Boles asked. "In this economy, we're going to have to be creative in raising revenue."

Cab rates and rants

Checker Cab Manager Michael Pomar went to the commission for fare adjustments and left with an earful of criticism - and the promise of a future meeting to study the city fare structure with all five cab companies operating in our city.

Pomar asked that the current zone system - a flat rate within set zones - be changed to a meter system. The result could double fares for longer trips between zones, but one driver noted fares would be lower for short round trips.

While commissioners agreed they need more information and discussion with all cab companies at a later date, Vice Mayor Errol Jones and Commissioner Don Crichlow took the occasion to vent their concerns. Answering Pomar's request for additional cab stands, Jones said the cabbies, "sometimes create a nuisance, throwing their litter everywhere." And Crichlow called cab drivers "the worst drivers on our streets." One driver suggested the markings on cabs make them targets. "If, say, all lawyers had signs on their cars, they might be considered terrible drivers," he said.

A Downtown Reunion

A proposal advanced recently by resident Bill Leary for a downtown reunion gained support in comments by Commissioner Nancy Sikes-Kline and resident Irene Arriola, who said, "in these times, we need to have things with a positive impact." Leary, a Planning and Zoning Board member, conducted extensive interviews in our community on the state of our city, and one idea was for an evening gathering downtown for residents, businesses, and visitors, with recollections of yesteryear supported by the archives of the St. Augustine Historical Society.

"Lots of cities have such gatherings on a regular basis," Arriola said, "but let's just try for one."

Dredging, tax exemption, and 5 barking dogs

Commissioners approved by unanimous votes the paperwork for a \$600,000 Salt Run Channel dredging, to be funded by the St. Augustine Port, Waterway & Beach District and a Florida Inland Navigation District (FIND) grant, and an increase from five to ten years the historic preservation property tax exemption on improvements, to encourage more property restoration. Our County Commission was urged to follow suit. The county currently recognizes the 5-year exemption from county taxes.

The appeal of a denial for a cell tower location in North City was tabled, as the applicants negotiate another location. And an M.L. King Avenue resident pleaded for help in quieting what he says are "five pit bulls, barking at all hours," in his neighbor's yard. City Manager Bill Harriss promised to take the matter to the county's animal control, which oversees animal complaints in our city.

Training trainers in Civil Rights history

Our county's teachers get some first-hand education Friday, February 13, in the second annual workshop on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Featured speakers include authors Dan R. Warren, *If It Takes All Summer*, Dr. David R. Colburn, *Racial Change & Community Crisis*, Dr. Thomas A. Wright, *Courage in Persona*, and 1960s Civil Rights activists Purcell Conway, Sr., and Dr. Robert B. Hayling. The workshop, presented by the 40th ACCORD & Northrop Grumman Corporation, is from 8-2:30 at Fullerwood Center, and concludes with a Freedom Trail Train Tour with local historian David Nolan.

Fashioning a royal visit

The thing about the visit of King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sofia of Spain to Pensacola next week is, they're not really interested in the exploits of that first settlement leader 450 years ago, but they are interested in an Indian tribe that was wiped out when accidentally infected by another Spanish explorer.

King Carlos, Queen Sofia

Not to take away from the herculean effort by Celebrate Pensacola to get the royal couple here, recounted in a [Pensacola News Journal](#) story, side notes were shared by Pensacola Archaeologist Judy Bense at the recent St. Augustine Historical Society annual meeting.

"The Spanish don't like losers," she said. "And despite good intentions, Tristan de Luna led a settlement expedition that was destroyed by a hurricane within a month of its arrival. What they want to see is the site of the Battle of Pensacola, where the Spanish Count Bernardo de Gálvez aided the Americans in the Revolutionary War, defeating the British and re-conquering Florida for Spain.

"They also want to learn more about the early native population, and the only area tribe was the Pensacola, wiped out before any records were made," Bense noted. "We're working on a reasonable description."

The visit February 19 is only their second to the United States. The first: to St. Augustine in 2001. This visit is heralded as the opening of a series of commemorations of Spain's influence on the earliest development of America, including the Ponce de Leon Quincentenary in 2013 and the 450th anniversary of our Nation's Oldest City in 2015.

George

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