



THE ST. AUGUSTINE The St. Augustine Report

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Local news in our Nation's Oldest City



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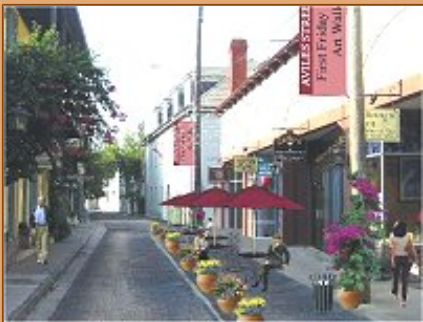
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City Commission in tax and vending crosshairs Increases pass, vending advances to public hearing

A half dozen residents spoke against proposed fee increases before our City Commission Monday night -six times the number who attended last week's commission budget workshop, where the needs were explained.

And more than twice that number spoke for and against a proposed new ordinance regulating vending in our Plaza de la Constitución, as the two hot button issues dominated Monday's City Commission meeting.

In the end, the city's fire assessment fee was raised from two to four cents on both property taxed and non-taxed buildings, the electric utility tax rate was changed from ten percent of the first \$100 on electric bills and one percent thereafter to a flat eight percent, and commissioners advanced to public hearing and final action at its September 14 meeting three ordinances regulating vending in public areas.



New Aviles Street plan

With City Commission blessing, the entrance block to Aviles Street off King can be transformed from parking spaces to wide sidewalk, landscaping, and outdoor café tables.

Our Historic Architecture Review Board (HARB) last week approved a plan that will now go to commissioners, along with a plea to revise the current

Commission hears pain of fee increases

"I could lose my home," "No time to be raising taxes," "Stop piling on the burdens," echoed through the Alcazar Room.

"There was one resident at our workshop meeting," Commissioner Nancy Sikes-Kline responded at one point. "We went through the budget line by line. No one's (city employees) getting raises, but they're still providing the same level of service."

Commissioner Don Crichlow noted that both the fire assessment and utility increases "best spread the burden" of balancing a budget already trimmed more than \$3 million from two years ago. Both increases apply to the estimated 36 percent of properties in the city that are non-taxed as well as taxed properties.

Vending ordinances face hearing

ban on outdoor dining along public ways.

City Chief Operations Officer John Regan said merchants and residents on the block are working together to advance the plan.

Artist suit settled

City commissioners Monday night approved a settlement with four Plaza artists who successfully got a temporary injunction in federal court, igniting the current host of new vending ordinances.

Under the agreement, the city will pay \$38,000 in attorneys' fees and \$10,000 to be divided among the artists. The attorneys' fee settlement is \$14,000 less than they sought.

City Attorney Ron Brown assured commissioners that the artists' attorneys have been formally notified of the proposed new ordinances.

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City budget now online

St. Augustine's 2009-2010 budget is [online](#), broken out in four Parts:

1-General Fund and Community Redevelopment Agency

2-Marina

3-Utilities, Stormwater, and Solid Waste

4-Heritage Tourism

The total budget, including self-supporting funds, is \$47,990,751, a reduction of more than \$3 million from \$51,238,246 two years ago. The General Fund for city operations, including police, fire, and public works, is \$20,665,458, a reduction of nearly \$1.5 million from the 2006-07 budget figure.

Public hearings on the 2009-2010 budget are scheduled for Thursday, September 3, and Thursday, September 17, both at 5:05 p.m. in the Alcazar Room at City Hall.

Tree committee gains greater role

Ordinances to restrict Plaza vending to the market building, ban vending as well as street entertainers on St. George Street, and prohibit sale of food and beverages throughout the city in public ways, all go to public hearings September 14, following approval to advance them.

And City Attorney Ron Brown said to expect additional ordinances as well, as the city readjusts to recent court rulings.

Two ordinances would ban all vending on St. George Street and food and beverage sales on public ways throughout the city. The proposed Plaza ordinance would limit vending activity in the Plaza to 12 spaces in the market building, to be chosen by monthly lottery, with a permit fee of \$75 per space.

Artists argued that the regulations will limit their First Amendment rights.

Commissioners Don Crichlow and Leanna Freeman were at odds over the proposed \$75 fee. While both expressed hope for the program's success, Crichlow argued a higher fee (he recommended \$15 a day) would bring quality vendors, while Freeman feared too high a fee would drive artists away.

Mayor Joe Boles took a different tack. "I'd rather not see any commercial activity, but I'm willing to try this," he said. Boles was piqued at a provision to allow vendors anywhere in the Plaza during special city events, such as the Nights of Lights and Thursday concerts. "These are ceremonial grounds, with monuments to our history," the mayor said. "I don't want to see vendors running all over it."

Four citizen members of our city's Street Tree Advisory Committee (STAC) successfully made their case Monday for greater recognition, more frequent meetings, and less city staff on the board.

Gina Burrell, Sally Ann Freeman, Robin Nadeau, and Chuck Lippi pleaded with commissioners to make STAC a commission - rather than a staff - advisory committee, create a landscape beautification subcommittee, and develop a five-year beautification plan for the city's entrance corridors.

"We just don't meet," Lippi, a certified arborist, told commissioners, noting the committee's last meeting was nine months ago.

City Chief Operations Officer John Regan responded, "Protecting our tree canopy is a core value of our community. But they're not going to be able to work effectively as a Sunshine committee (if appointed by the commission). The Aviles Street beautification plan recently announced is working because merchants and residents are able to meet individually at any time, without formal notice. We hope this will be a model for other neighborhoods to work on beautification projects."

Regan said he'll schedule a meeting of a revised STAC board for next week.

The Street Tree Advisory Committee was created as part of the Tree City USA program, appointed by Planning and Building Director Mark Knight. In recent years, citizen members have been more active in strengthening the city's tree code, while more staff members were added. Today there are five citizen and five staff members.

The St. Augustine Report is published by the Department of Public Affairs of the City of St. Augustine each Tuesday and on Fridays previewing City Commission meetings. The Report is written and distributed by George Gardner, former St. Augustine Mayor (2002-2006) and Commissioner (2006-2008) and a longtime newspaper reporter and editor. Contact The Report at gardner@aug.com

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