

Campground questions in Town of Sand Lake

Greg Marsten | Burnett County Sentinel | July 9, 2021



Burnett County Board Chair and Town of Sand Lake county board supervisor, Don Taylor (pictured at right) spoke before a crowd of over 100 people last Friday, July 2 outside the Sand Lake Town Hall. Chairman Taylor addressed what the county can and cannot do about the recent 'surprise' campgrounds that have started development in the Town of Sand Lake, which has not adopted the county's comprehensive zoning.

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Over 100 people attended a hastily planned public awareness meeting at the Sand Lake Town Hall on Friday, July 2, addressing recent news that several campgrounds are about to become a reality in the Town of Sand Lake, which does not follow Burnett County's comprehensive zoning.

The issues were brought to light in the last few weeks, surprising neighbors affected and even elected town officials, most of whom were unaware of the pending campground proposals or expansions.

“Until June 14th, I didn’t know or wouldn’t have ever known about a campground being built, just 35-feet from my property!” stated Town of Sand Lake treasurer Melanie Connor Johnson, who spoke at length about the proposals and the issues behind the ‘surprise’ campgrounds. “They haven’t contacted us (towns officials) because without comprehensive zoning, they really don’t have to.”

Johnson and others pointed out that because Sand Lake does not follow Burnett County’s comprehensive zoning laws, there are very few reasons for developers to seek any interaction with local government, beyond applications for driveway permits, sanitary sewer construction or uniform dwelling codes.

The one exception is whether the affected property is within 1,000-feet of a water body, which then triggers the county zoning rules under so-called Shoreland Zoning.

“The reality is that right now, in Sand Lake, there isn’t much we can do,” Melanie Connor Johnson said, who added that she believes the town should change that to follow comprehensive zoning. “So that way we can have (development) in a fair, transparent way, that’s applied evenly.”

Several of the speakers admonished the town board for not considering the comprehensive zoning process, and while many of those same people realize it may be a moot point now, they want it serve as an example of what can go wrong when there are no real ‘checks and balances’ in development and land issues.

“It really may be too late for use,” Johnson added. “But it may not be too late for you. We beg the town board to adopt county zoning.”

Burnett County Board chairman and Sand Lake supervisory representative, Don Taylor, spoke briefly to the issue, and agreed that in reality, even with comprehensive zoning in place, there is little they can do to halt development or expansion of campgrounds.

“Zoning won’t stop a campground,” Taylor said flatly as he discussed another proposal that has reached ‘a legal phase,’ involving denial of a conditional use permit (CUP) on a campground elsewhere in the county. “The truth is, it’s very hard for Zoning (department officials) to deny a permit that’s properly done.”

Taylor noted the current county moratorium on new campground CUP proposals, that he is fully expecting the current moratorium to be extended for several months, in spite of the state having “a general dislike for them.”

Taylor suggested the county and maybe the town draft issues they want to be included in such limits or things to add to the current rules, so that when the moratorium does expire, they can put those changes into effect with the moratorium expiring.

Taylor also said that studies and research continue on the issue, but that some of the problems mentioned are difficult to prove as adverse, especially things like increased traffic or added pressure on law enforcement. He also suggested that because of the lack of comprehensive zoning in several towns in Burnett County, the elected officials do not have to be notified of any CUP application or permitting, beyond those issues of driveways or septic systems.

“The town board would be notified on a CUP application, to be zoned, then the board would have a voice on zoning issues,” Taylor said.

Melanie Connor Johnson stressed that point, as well, that there is currently “No real process” and that the only thing standing in the way of new campsites going up “By next weekend” is that they have appealed to the state DNR on there being possible inclusion in the shoreland zoning, but that the underlying issue there is that they don’t

have accurate mapping currently to really even know who or where those zoning rules take effect.

Several people mentioned the need for more accurate LIDAR mapping of the town, to confidently know where those shoreland zones really are and who is and is not affected.

“We should have a DNR water specialist in Spooner come in to see where the water really is,” Johnson said.

As for what is next, Taylor said that residents should probably, politely, make their voices heard with the board, and he also suggested the best way to get comprehensive zoning is for a town referendum on the next ballot.

Members of the Town of Sand Lake board were not at the meeting, although the new town clerk and treasurer were in attendance.

Two of the ‘new’ campgrounds they referenced are from Rachel Swanson, who is proposing a 60-plus site RV campground off of Dongala and Peterson roads, which has been halted for now as the DNR assesses the shoreland zoning issue.

According to information at the meeting, Swanson is also currently constructing a smaller, 6-unit campground, with plans to expand to 30 adjacent sites, none of which would be affected by the shoreland zoning, but has had septic permits processed.

There is also a possible third campground proposal in Sand Lake, reportedly on Okerlund Road, although that is just speculation, for now, and the DNR has been asked to look into the shoreland zoning issue on that one, as well.

Several of the residents at the meeting did point out the positives of not being zoned, including how shed, additions and small structure building is much easier and cheaper currently, but several others then pointed out that whether it is a garden shed or a

20,000-head livestock operation, without comprehensive zoning, there is no real difference between them in the eyes of the law.

“Yes, regulations you’re asking your neighbors to follow, you’ll also have to follow,” Melanie Connor Johnson said with a nod.



Melanie Connor Johnson (left) helped people see exactly where several proposed campgrounds are likely to go in, and how close they may be to other residents' properties.

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Other possible negatives from having many more potentially huge campground(s) in the town were raised, from septic waste disposal and the lack of facilities to treat the effluents, to road damage, traffic safety, noise, and possible impacts on the local services from law enforcement to medical, and even things like invasive species, pollution and the like.

“But I think the real issue is, and this is just what I think, is that we can’t support having so many more people here,” Chairman Taylor said.