

County LUI Committee urges campground limits

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After half a year of research, testimony, input and discussions, the Burnett County Land Use and Information Committee (LUI) unanimously passed a series of recommendations for updated rules designed to mitigate and clarify future campground developments.

The committee met on Tuesday, Oct. 5, where they took public comments and discussed the impacts and recommendations before a vote.

The RV campground issue has garnered months of often contentious comments and varying views on everything from the number of sites that should be allowed to temporary campers' impacts on public services, pollution, noise, water quality and general quality of life. They also heard from several of the people who make their livings off such camping, either as owner/operators or as dealers and service technicians for the units.

The LUI committee also heard testimony on how 'camping' as a term has gone from the description of a tent or small camper to what are called 'park model' recreational vehicles, with up to 400-square feet, often set-up for years at a time.

The committee also went over dozens, if not hundreds of letters, comments and correspondence on the issue, mainly from people concerned or opposed to letting the current inundation of and proliferation of campground proposals and expansion be limited, but also from some of the people in favor of expansion or even more developments.

The group Preserve Burnett County has been a strong advocate for limits, suggesting and hoping for much smaller overall site numbers, looking for limits of 50 new sites, citing concerns of high-density development, and expanded threats to water and quality of life issues, but the committee ended up recommending a 100-site limit.

The campground development issue is not just affecting rural areas, as several villages have also been involved in the issue, and have weighed-in, as well, while also being involved in potential litigation and legal issues involving proposed sites.

"Over 1,600 county residents and property owners voiced their concerns about the rampant growth of high-density campgrounds here over the last few years," said Patrick Hansen, a spokesperson for the Preserve Burnett County group. "Local citizens made it clear that they want uniform, sensible standards in siting, size and density of these so-called 'campgrounds', which are primarily RV and park model lots, with large patios, decks, and sheds. Once these 'camping units' are installed, they never move."

Hansen and others from the group noted hopes to cap the number of campsites in a campground, while also asking to limit or reduce campgrounds in residential areas and also to create a 14-day limit on length of stay for what is referred to as 'temporary camping.'

Several of the people who are involved in camping supplies or development registered their hopes that the committee recognized the need for expansion to meet a growing demand,

with several noting that most people cannot afford a traditional lake home or cabin, and that camping and RV sites allows them a way to enjoy the county and the outdoors.

"We are the areas experts on the subject (of park model RVs)," stated Christopher Anderson of Siren Country Campers, who noted the value of the units, both in property taxes but in employment and even in styling, stating they have sold or delivered over 1,000 such units to hundreds of campsites, meeting hundreds of wonderful people along the way. "You need to realize that Burnett County is in competition with other areas (for tourists and seasonal campers)."

Anderson was among several people trying to bring more campers and users to the area, claiming that it is not only economically beneficial, but a way for the county to approach the future and grow from within.

The debate went for nearly an hour-and-a-half, with the committee weighing in along the way, and ultimately voting 6-0 to recommend approval of the new rules, which would create a new zoning district with a 10-acre minimum, primarily focused on current and possible campground owners.

The LUI committee also approved setting a limitation on campgrounds in residential areas, while also limiting so-called 'temporary camping' to 25 units on agricultural and forest land, with a further limit of 100 sites in the proposed new zoning district.

Several supervisor commented that the new limits would restore much of the local control that is seemingly non-existent in many land use questions, noting how many of those controls were eliminated legislatively with the passage of Wisconsin Act 67.

"I think this will take that 900-pound gorilla off our backs," stated LUI vice chair Craig Conroy.

The final approval of the LUI committee proposals still require Burnett County Board of Supervisors approval, which they will consider at their next full board meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 26.

"We didn't get everything we'd hoped for," said Hansen, who acknowledged that the 'Preserve' group didn't get all their wishes, Hansen said he thinks the process are a step in the right direction. "We're happy with the outcome, but also staying vigilant to see how any new rules play out."