

Annexation approved, McKeon admonished

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

The three-year wait to annex a 30-acre undeveloped parcel from Sarasota County into the city of Venice is over.

The property, located at Pinebrook Road and Laurel Avenue, was annexed by city council Tuesday despite threats of litigation, and could clear the way for construction of a Publix supermarket and retail center. The property still has to be rezoned, a comprehensive plan amendment adopted and a site plan approved before construction can begin.

In some of the strongest language used since he took office in November, Mayor John Holic criticized detractors of the annexation as “hijackers,” and admonished Vice Mayor Kit McKeon for testifying as a private citizen before the county commission early on Tuesday without council’s approval in support of stipulations to the annexation.

“I am compelled to remind council we are a body of seven, not seven bodies going their own way,” Holic said. “Mr. McKeon, every time you speak in front of someone you are vice mayor. I consider that the same type of thing we criticized another member for ... going out and acting on their own.”

Holic was referring to Council Member Bob Daniels who met with former City Manager Isaac Turner before he resigned.

“Let’s bring it up here before city council before we take it somewhere else. (Daniels) was criticized as a puppet of the CQG (Citizens for Quality Government political action committee). If you were criticized as a puppet of the VTL (Venice Taxpayers League) you wouldn’t like it.”

Without naming him, Holic also had harsh words for Bob Burrus, a Sorrento Ranches resident of Sarasota County who threatened to fund a suit by Venice Taxpayers Inc. against the city if it didn’t agree to stipulations drafted by his attorney, Dan Lobeck, and Jeff Boone, attorney for the purchaser of the property.

Boone testified the stipulations were an attempt to avoid litigation, and are not legally required for the annexation.

“I’ve never felt more hijacked than at this time. If we are going to subject ourselves to a gun at our head” every single time a group objects we’ll never get anything done, Holic said.

“We have an annexation that we need to get done,” he said to applause.

Council voted unanimously to agree to only two of seven stipulations sought by Burrus. One is amending the joint planning agreement with Sarasota County to state the parcel does not create an enclave or pocket, and is “urban in character” as defined by the state because it will undergo development for commercial purposes. The other is agreeing to make similar changes in its comprehensive amendment, but not under the time frame sought by Burrus.

Burrus is president of Sorrento Ranches Homeowners Association, although he testified he was not representing the association.

Residents from the larger Sorrento Area Residential Association support the nearby annexation and hope one day to be annexed into the city. Residents from Venetian Golf & River Club and Willow Chase in North Venice also supported the annexation. They currently drive almost 10 miles to the nearest major retail center.

Council approved the petition on first reading three years ago, but it didn’t make it to final reading until this week due to delays in passing the city’s comprehensive plan.

ggiles@venicegondolier.com