

Revamped VNC threatens suit over airport

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

The Venice Neighborhoods Coalition, which lay dormant for almost two years, has been resurrected and is already threatening to sue the city.

Gulf Shores resident Chris Davis, president of the new VNC, which filed for nonprofit status on Dec. 11, testified Tuesday before Venice City Council, raising airport issues the city thought were long settled.

In her first appearance before council as VNC president, Davis hand-delivered a letter from attorney Steven Gieseler, representing the organization.

“Our client’s members want only to be able to enjoy living in their homes in peace. They gain nothing from protracted legal action or from opposing the city’s plan for oppositions sake. However, they have advised us to convey that they are entirely willing and able to commence necessary administrative and legal action to protect this fundamental right,” Gieseler wrote.

Davis brought with her new members of the VNC board to attempt to inject new life into old objections. They include challenging the “C-II” airport designation, an indicator of aircraft size, that city leaders were unable to change after three solid years of attempts. She also claimed the airport is expanding, although a compromise plan calls for eventually shrinking the runway-protection zone off 22 of 24 homes in the Gulf Shores.

Protracted negotiations between the city and FAA resulted in lawsuits that cost the city almost \$1 million in attorney and consultants fees and staff time, and threatened to derail much needed airport runway improvements after a soured relationship with the FAA. City leaders are keen on rebuilding that relationship.

The city heralded a compromise in 2010 when the FAA agreed to move one runway back away from the Gulf Shores neighborhood toward South Venice, removing the RPZ off the homes.

Still unhappy, Davis said homeowners were never apprised they lived underneath an RPZ, although the airport is just blocks away.

Ironically, that all changed when the VNC first raised awareness of the issue, causing a whirlwind of media coverage.

Davis said a scrivener’s error on the 2000 airport layout plan that showed the RPZ wasn’t over some of the homes, which is now being corrected on updated airport layout plans, is by definition an expansion.

The city has emphatically and repeatedly said it’s not.

The plan is to reconstruct Runway 13-31, nearest the neighborhood, 500 feet to 700 feet away, eventually pulling the RPZ off the homes. But not until noise-abatement Runway 4-22 is refurbished, which will move additional traffic off Runway 13-31 away from Gulf Shores.

The projects will cost millions, mostly in federal funds, but could take years to accomplish.

VNC was created by former Council Member Sue Lang, but disbanded not long after she was elected in 2007 amid airport controversy. She lost an attempt at re-election in November in a lopsided vote.

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