

State changes could affect comp plan

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

Gov. Rick Scott's announcement Monday that he intends to merge growth and development oversight responsibilities from the Department of Community Affairs into the Department of Environmental Protection may have implications for Venice.

At a special meeting on Tuesday, city council wanted to know what it means.

Mayor John Holic and two others elected in November, Jeanette Gates and Bob Daniels, were critical of the comp plan adopted last year, especially over the dozens of future studies called for in the plan. The generic plan must now be converted into more specific land-use regulations. Council's chief concern is that could take years to accomplish.

Holic singled out the estimated \$15,000 to study and revamp building height LDRs as an example of waste.

"I think the average person on the street doesn't care if we do a study on building height," he said. "Everyone knows (the maximum) is three stories. Every penny we spend on this is a penny we are not going to be spending on employee wages, a new computer system" and other critical needs. "I don't want to see taxpayers' hardearned money go up in smoke on something we don't need."

"It's taking away property owners' rights," Gates said.

"I have a hard time moving ahead with this," Daniels said. "I seriously question if our state wants us to do this. We need a plan, but I don't think we need a plan this thick spelling out this (kind of) detail. Taxpayers don't want to spend money on this."

Tom Slaughter, general manager of development services, and planner Chad Minor introduced a scaled-back first-year work plan. Slaughter estimated the workload for comp plan tasks next year at \$240,000, down from \$350,000.

Council said Slaughter was headed in the right direction, but wanted the work plan trimmed even more.

"We think there are additional reductions that might be appropriate," Slaughter agreed.

What will become of the DCA? council asked.

"There is strong thought at the state level that DCA is broken," Slaughter said.

The DCA staff who helped usher the Venice comprehensive plan to fruition over a three-year period "have all been shuffled aside," he said.

But don't expect the state, which has some of the country's strictest laws regarding growth and planned development, to become one that takes a hand-off approach and merely monitors the submission of reports, staff said. It's too early to tell, according to Slaughter.

“One of the things we don’t want to do is send the message that we’re stepping away” from the plan, he said. “We’re not the first city that adopted a plan and then said, ‘How are we going to get this done?’”

Even if the DCA is dissolved, Slaughter said, the city might have to assume some of those tasks.

“This is a sea change,” said land-use attorney Jeff Boone.

“The regulations are going to stay in place. The question is, who is going to regulate it? My guess is some combination (of state and local authorities.) I believe the city should move forward with the comp plan, and not just assume if DCA goes away we won’t have to do this.

“Even if the regs get thrown back to the city, the city would have to make a decision to go through that process. This might be a two- or three-year process.”