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FEATURED

## Debate continues about usage of KCB City Hall

By RICHARD TAMBORRINO Special to The Citizen

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While disagreements rage about whether the city of Key Colony Beach rebuilds or repairs its city hall, there is legitimate debate as to whether the current structure can be used in the interim for large group meetings.

Commissioner Joey Raspe asked that exact question at the Nov. 16 commission meeting.

There are very distinct differences between the true condition of that facility maintained by proponents of a rebuild and newly discovered FEMA documents sent to the city last year, further clouding this already tempestuous argument.

FEMA launched a fraud investigation against the city in July based on allegations that former Key Colony Beach City Administrator Chris Moonis and former Mayor John Deneale ordered city staff to alter the condition of the city hall floor after Hurricane Irma to make the facility eligible for rebuild funding.

These documents were recently uncovered in City Hall by City Attorney Dirk Smits, who did not return requests for comment in time for the publication of this story.

An Oct. 2022 public assistance eligibility response letter from FEMA Infrastructure

Branch Manager Gary Glover to KCB City Administrator Dave Turner clearly states the work and cost claimed by KCB is not entitled to the almost \$3.9 million that was requested. Roughly \$162,000 was approved.

In KCB's original request for FEMA PA (public assistance), the denial is because FEMA determined the building only sustained cosmetic damage. KCB submitted a request for total replacement of City Hall and its contents because of Hurricane Irma damage in 2017.

The letter clearly stated that "based on FEMA policy and project cost calculations, this project does not meet the 50% Rule and does not qualify for replacement". Not only did FEMA determine it didn't meet the 50% threshold for a rebuild, FEMA calculated the percentage at just under 9%.

Proponents of a complete city hall rebuild have been maintaining for more than a year that the damage to city hall met or exceeded the 50% rule.

The letter states that engineers determined the building's concrete slab which sustained almost 2 feet of water inundation during Irma were pre-existing. "The voids beneath the slab were an ongoing long-term condition", it states, but that "the foundation was not in imminent danger of failure, and subsequently, the structure is not unfit for occupation," the letter stated.

Furthermore, facts stated in the FEMA document support Commissioner Freddie Foster's ongoing contention that the 50% threshold hadn't been met. He publicly stated then that the floor, ADA upgrades, if required, and any code improvements were to be calculated in the determination. In fact, Foster had that same disagreement with Commissioner Tom Harding during his request to have city hall repairs put out for formal bids.

So after six years, Raspe's question about why city hall can't be used today appears

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valid.

Raspe said last week that many residents wanted Marble Hall in city hall reopened for more meetings while a final determination on it hangs in the balance. He said that “there is no place for social groups to go in this city.” Marble Hall was closed to groups in July 2022, after being open shortly after remediation until last June.

Raspe talked by phone about the subject in the past week, emphasizing the city attorney’s advice to not comment while litigation is ongoing. But he still maintains strong sentiment on the subject.

“My wife taught federally funded enhanced fitness classes for 15 years in that building,” Raspe said. “She had 25 attendees three days a week, in season. Suddenly, they weren’t allowed back in after the hall was closed last July. We were allowed to use the hall to stuff backpacks for kids during last year’s boating and fishing event in June, but then it was shut down altogether. Everything in the building works, like the bathrooms and the air conditioning”.

He concluded by saying “I’m not done with this, unless you can show me a reason why.”

He continued, saying the fishing and boating club, which has 200 members, was forced to meet recently at the KCB Public Works building which doesn’t have air conditioning. Other groups have been forced to go to various locations and pay site fees for their events. “Marble Hall is more than adequate”, he said.

The true condition of city hall is connected to the curious last-minute addition at last week’s commission meeting. The city’s architect for the rebuild project, LIVs president Tony Rosabal, kicked off the session with a presentation on the current state of city hall. Raspe said this presentation wasn’t even on the agenda and that he and Commissioner Freddie Foster were blindsided by it. Raspe suspected it was

carefully orchestrated by Turner, Raspe said.

Raspe had even publicly asked to add his Marble Hall concern to the Nov. 16 agenda, which was pushed to the commissioner comments portion of the meeting at the very end. But when it came time for Raspe to raise that concern, he was quickly told by Mayor pro tem Beth Ramsay Vickery this was not a subject that should be discussed at this meeting.

Raspe questioned aloud, “if the architect was allowed to outline his findings, why can he speak, and I can’t?”

It’s possible that Marble Hall’s closure and certain city officials’ unwillingness to broach the city hall subject is because of the pending referendum litigation. It’s also possible if more group events and overall access is allowed at city hall, it illustrates the adequacy of the structure, while also weakening the argument for a new \$10 million structure.

Legally and perhaps even logically, the two issues are separate and independent. But a group striving to execute a complete city hall rebuild looks like they’re not taking any chances by opening the hall and threatening their push.

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