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FEATURED

Division in KCB extends beyond project

By RICHARD TAMBORRINO Special to The Citizen

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The Key Colony Beach City Commission held its monthly session on Thursday, May 18, at the Key Colony Inn and negative resident sentiment toward the commission and City Administrator Dave Turner continued to intensify over consideration for plans to rebuild City Hall.

But the growing division that exists in KCB appears to extend beyond residents feuding with the city as commissioners are also sharply divided among themselves.

The deadline for rebuild bids is Monday, June 5. City Administrator Dave Turner projects the cost to be between \$7 million and \$8 million; however, many residents believe it will cost much more. Rebuilding the town's administrative center is atop Mayor Patti Trefry and Turner's agenda since the building has been virtually vacant of city staff for almost six years since sustaining damage from Hurricane Irma.



Turner

An aggressive email campaign was distributed the evening before the commission

meeting and illustrates how resident sentiment is intensifying. The email began with “We are writing as a group of concerned and motivated KCB citizens. Our concern about the future of Key Colony Beach has reached an alarming level, and we believe every resident should be just as alarmed.”

The email, coupled with a petition campaign demanding “a referendum to decide once and for all how KCB voters want to go forward” with refurbishing or entirely rebuilding city hall as well as KCB resident comments, show the city and many of residents are deeply divided.

Before the session moved to citizen comments, City Clerk Silvia Gransee recognized more than 25 email submissions that had all been forwarded to the commission documenting strong sentiment against the city’s plans. Additionally, more than 35 others attended the meeting via Zoom who added similar views.

Resident Laurie Swanson kicked off the comments portion, sharply chastising Turner and the commission, saying, “We know your job is difficult, and you promised to do your utmost for the city,” but “KCB government has moved away from its residents and is deaf to their desires. Turner is Public Enemy No. 1 and fact checking him is like fact checking Fox News.”

After Swanson’s comments, appreciable applause emerged from those in attendance, which Mayor Trefry gaveled down, demanding order.

Later, 20-year KCB resident Marie Flood, a real estate broker with Flood Realty Group Inc., said she’s “never seen the city this divided” and added in the email campaign that “I had a business owner in Big Pine Key tell me, ‘We are glad you took him (Turner) off our hands.’ How telling. He should never have been hired.”

The unrest has gotten particularly personal toward Turner, a former New Jersey firefighter and Lower Keys Chamber of Commerce executive director prior to

joining the KCB staff.

The email campaign claims that Turner's annual review was negative, that he "misled the city about his qualifications when he applied to the administrator position" and that he says he used to "be a licensed contractor, project manager, building official and building inspector" but that "there are no records in the State of Florida or New Jersey to confirm Turner holds any of these licenses."

Turner did not return requests for comment after the session.

City administration decisions at the time Hurricane Irma impacted KCB have a bearing on the current impasse. There are conflicting versions of FEMA's finding about whether the building met the 50% threshold of damage for a necessary rebuild. Then-Mayor John DeNeale admitted in a letter in 2020 that the building was under 50%, which would have rendered the building repairable.

But Vice Mayor Beth Ramsay-Vickery said that the 2018 FEMA assessment of city hall revealed "substantial damage exceeding their 50% threshold for repair or rebuilding a structure."

Kathryn McCullough was the KCB city clerk during Irma and said by phone that former City Administrator Chris Moonis handled the FEMA reimbursement process. That money was placed in the city's general fund, much of which was spent for debris removal and "to get the city back online."

However, she also alleges that a center section of the City Hall floor that had been filled in pre-Irma was chipped out intentionally to make the storm damage appear more serious.

"The floor was sinking and had been for a while," McCullough said. "Staff called it 'the fault line.' Moonis had Public Works remove temporary concrete to make it

look like the floor sank after Irma” in order to meet the 50% threshold.

Ramsay-Vickery issued the following statement after the meeting: “I cannot support moving in a direction that is in conflict with FEMA’s 50% Substantial Damages rule as it is mandated and necessary for our city to remain in compliance with the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) requirements. All legitimate documentation that I have received shows the cost to repair to pre-damage conditions far exceeds FEMA’s threshold for substantial damages. My vote was in consideration of FEMA’s rule for substantial damages and in ensuring that we remain in compliance with federal regulations.”

Ramsay-Vickery added that three engineering reports confirmed more than 50% damage.

Local contractor Ed Sims, who supplied a refurbishing estimate in 2018 for about \$300,000, believes the building can be restored and elevated, although those cost estimates are markedly higher today than what he quoted five years ago.

So, the city’s next step will be to review 22 bids already received for a new building and any others arriving by the June 5 deadline. Depending on the bids, the commission is expected to conduct a formal comparison of those versus current refurbishing bids.

Regardless, the city is quickly approaching a reckoning point, and the current gridlock continues.

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