

COVER
STORY

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BELLEAIR BEACH MEETING GETS
'OUT OF HAND,' MAYOR SAYS
COUNCIL, RESIDENTS CLASH OVER BEACH ACCESS
LOTS IN BELLEAIR SHORE**"I DON'T AGREE WITH IF THEY DO
GET SUED FOR SOMETHING DUMB,
THAT WE PAY A DIME FOR IT"**

-Mayor Dave Gattis

**"WHILE THE AGREEMENT DOES INTRODUCE BELLEAIR SHORE AS A
PARTNER IN MANAGING THESE AREAS, IT DOES NOT — AND I
REPEAT, IT CANNOT — LEGALLY DISSOLVE THE DEEDED PROPERTY
RIGHTS OF BELLEAIR BEACH RESIDENTS." -Mayor Dave Gattis**

BELLEAIR BEACH—A meeting on a proposed beach access agreement with Belleair Shore was cut short after devolving into heated exchanges between city council members and residents.

The emotionally charged April 27 work session unraveled in just over an hour, as audience members clashed with city leaders over the draft agreement and broader beach access concerns — prompting the mayor to gavel the meeting to a close. Work sessions are held for council discussion only, and public input is normally not taken.

The abrupt ending laid bare deep-seated divisions between the neighboring coastal communities over a 2003 interlocal agreement covering the shared use of three beachfront lots at 600, 1200 and 1880 Gulf Blvd.

One of three beach access lots that are used jointly by residents of Belleair Beach and Belleair Shore. Photo by Carlos Moncada.



Those lots trace back to a series of deeds in the 1940s, when the parcels were transferred from hotelier Arnold Kirkeby to the Belleair Beach Improvement District — which later became the Town of Belleair Shore — with provisions allowing nearby property owners to use them “for beach or bathing purposes.”

Rather than granting ownership, the deeds established a perpetual, non-exclusive license for use of the land. That distinction remains central to the ongoing dispute between the two municipalities.

Belleair Beach leaders have spent years trying to update the agreement, saying it has led to continued squabbling with Belleair

Shore over such things as access, maintenance and control of the gated lots.

“It’s not working,” City Attorney Thomas Trask said. “That was the purpose of the new interlocal agreement — so that we could figure out and solve these differences that keep coming about on a regular basis.”

Belleair Shore officials, who were not at the work session, have suggested several changes to the agreement. Most would allow the tiny town to take over maintenance duties now handled by Belleair Beach, such as beach raking, trash removal and landscaping.

Town officials also have proposed assuming other costs such as towing enforcement and infrastructure upkeep on the three lots, leaving some on the council to question their motives.

“I think that they are wanting more control over what they’ve got,” Mayor Dave Gattis said.

The draft also would clarify that residents of both municipalities have access to the lots and specify that the underlying deeds grant a “non-exclusive license” to use the land, rather than conveying ownership rights.

One provision that would require the localities to share legal costs if disputes or lawsuits arise raised concerns about how liability would be divided.

“I don’t agree with if they do get sued for something dumb, that we pay a dime for it,” Gattis said.

Some questioned whether shifting maintenance responsibilities to Belleair Shore could limit their ability to ensure the lots are properly managed. Council member Kimberly Shaw Elliott asked how the city could enforce standards if the town assumes control.

Trask said enforcement options would be limited, but noted the agreement could be terminated by either party with 60 days’ notice if problems arise.

Others suggested a compromise approach, such as splitting maintenance costs while retaining joint oversight.

Belleair Beach Mayor Dave Gattis disputed a flyer that claimed residents’ property rights were at risk.

Photo from City of Belleair Beach.



Belleair Beach City Council member Frank Bankard asked what Belleair Shore has done for the city.



“I’m looking for a balanced approach that matches the needs of both communities,” council member Todd Harper said.

The public outburst was sparked in part by a flyer circulated before the meeting warning that residents’ property rights were being threatened, which the mayor strongly disputed.

“The flyer uses alarmist language — force, threat, taken from you — to describe what is essentially a cost-sharing and maintenance contract,” Gattis told the crowd. “While the agreement does introduce Belleair Shore as a partner in managing these areas, it does not — and I repeat, it cannot — legally dissolve the deeded property rights of Belleair Beach residents.”

Still, several residents — and council member Frank Bankard — voiced distrust of Belleair Shore officials and opposed ceding control over the lots. Some urged the council to abandon negotiations altogether.

“Tell me one good thing Belleair Shore has done for any of us,” Bankard said.

Belleair Shore officials could not be reached for comment.

At one point, Bankard was asked to lower his voice, to which he vociferated, “Am I talking too loud?”

The audience responded with a resound-

ing “No,” applause and chants of “Frank for mayor.”

But Gattis suggested that Bankard, who regularly attends Belleair Shore town commission meetings, was part of the problem.

“I want to put the arguments between the two communities to bed,” he said. “And all I see is you going over there and poking the bear every chance you get.”

Some audience members criticized the council and its handling of the process, including not allowing public comment. After additional shouting and cross-talk, Gattis adjourned the meeting, leaving five other agenda items in limbo.

“Honestly, whenever you know things are out of hand, it’s better not to continue with the meeting,” the mayor later told Beach Scene. “It was looking out for the safety and well-being of the council as well as the attendees.”

Before adjourning, council members discussed submitting individual draft revisions, which would then be compiled and sent back to Belleair Shore for further negotiation.

Any final agreement would require approval by both governments as well as public hearings.