

Commission's shift will oust semi-trucks from Acreage



Carolyn Abbey speaks during public comments at the Palm Beach County Commission meeting in downtown West Palm Beach on Thursday. THOMAS CORDY/PALM BEACH POST

Enforcement behind vote flip; final decision soon

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Operators of the hundreds of tractor-trailers in The Acreage will have to look for a new place to park under a revised ordinance that regulates commercial truck parking there.

In a surprise, the Palm Beach County Commission voted 4-2 Thursday on first reading against a plan by Commissioner Sara Baxter that would have allowed each of the more than 30,000 lots there to have two 80,000-pound tractor-trailers.

Baxter's request to at least allow those operators who have been there for years to stay also failed to gain any support. Just last month, the commission voted 4-3 to advertise Baxter's proposed ordinance. Commissioners Mack



An Acreage resident critical of the proposed zoning change that would allow for more tractor-trailer rigs provides a picture to county commissioners showing that some residents are storing multiple trucks on their properties in violation of the county code. PROVIDED

Bernard and Marci Woodward flipped their votes Thursday.

The existing operators are expected to be given some time to find new sites before code enforcement takes action against them.

Woodward said she changed her vote after area residents made a compelling case for why a weight limit of 80,000 pounds was too much. She said

enforcing such an ordinance would place an impossible burden on code enforcement and could result in having to double the size of its staff.

"We would have to have someone out there on every street," she said. "What happens on nights and weekends?"

Intense opposition developed since

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last month's vote; opponents called the change at Thursday's public hearing a recipe for disaster.

Richard Vassalotti, a longtime resident of The Acreage and a retired fire-rescue captain, said it was "unfathomable" to consider adding hundreds, if not thousands of semis, to the unimproved roads in The Acreage. He said he has responded to "horrific" tractor-trailer crashes resulting in fatalities, claiming it is unsafe for them to be on roads that were never designed to accommodate their size.

Opponents presented a video to the commission showing first responders coming to the rescue of those injured in an accident involving tractor-trailers.

Speaking out against the higher weight limit were the Indian Trail Improvement District, the Acreage Landowners Association, former County Commissioner Jeff Koons and scores of Acreage residents who said trying to cope with the growing number of semis has been a nightmare. The district said it was prepared to sue the county if it approved the weight limit of 80,000 pounds.



Koons

The district maintains the road system and assesses homeowners for the expense. It estimated the cost of repairing roads damaged by additional semis to be in excess of \$1.5 billion, much more than the \$2,500 fee that Baxter proposed to levy against new trucks that come there.

The issue of whether the trucks can stay has been debated for some time. Baxter, who represents The Acreage, has been a strong ally of the truckers, arguing that many of them have operated there for years. Code enforcement began citing them two years ago. More



Ricardo Alonzo, right, sits with his wife, Natalia Melian, during public comments at the Palm Beach County Commission meeting in downtown West Palm Beach on Thursday. The couple joined other red shirt-wearing citizens attending the meeting. THOMAS CORDY/PALM BEACH POST

than 500 trucks in The Acreage weigh in excess of 16,000 pounds, according to county planners.

Baxter initially pushed for an increase in the weight limit for areas in the county designated residential-agricultural to 16,000 pounds from 12,500. County commissioners have agreed to the 16,000-pound limit. Most lawn-service companies and businesses with box trucks will be able to operate with that higher limit. Also permitted will be two commercial trucks at that limit parked on each lot. The current ordinance allows for only one.

At issue was Baxter's move to carve out a special exception for The Acreage, allowing the two 80,000-pound trucks on each lot. Critics argued the result would have been an industrial parking lot in a residential area.

Many of the truckers say they were told by Realtors that it was legal to move their operations to The Acreage. They

say a code-enforcement crackdown occurred after new developments came to the region. They have argued, with the support of state Rep. Rick Roth, R-West Palm Beach, that it is unfair for the county to go after small businesses that are serving an important function for residents.

Commissioner Maria Marino said she was concerned that other areas of the county would also demand the higher weight limit of 80,000 pounds if the Baxter proposal was approved. It might be difficult to say no to them from a legal standpoint, she noted.

County commissioners will cast their final vote Feb. 22 to adopt the revised ordinance. It is possible they could again change their minds, but Baxter was the sole commissioner supporting a weight limit above 16,000 pounds. She argued that it was unfair to blame all of the road damage on the semis. Some of the damage has come from builders that have

constructed thousands of new homes in developments outside The Acreage, she said.

Critics, she claimed, were guilty of fear mongering.

County Mayor Maria Sachs voted with Baxter, but she told The Palm Beach Post that she voted that way because she was opposed to even increasing the weight limit from 12,500 to 16,000 pounds.

County Commissioner Gregg Weiss, a strong opponent of the changes, was out of town attending a National Association of Counties' conference. Had he been present, he likely would have voted against Baxter's proposal. His chief of staff, Neils Heimeiriks, read a statement for him.

"This debate isn't about government overreach. It is about balancing competing interests and playing by the rules. I'm not aware of any county (in Florida) that allows semitrucks to park in AR zoning districts. You know why? Because it is bad policy. It sets a terrible precedent. I won't stand for it."

What was not in dispute Thursday was the critical shortage of parking spaces for the semis. Many of them can be found parked along ramps of Interstate 95 and Florida's Turnpike.

Weiss and Elizabeth Accomando, the president of the district's board of supervisors, said they will support efforts to find a space for a parking lot to house the tractor trailers. Weiss said he has already reached out to state and federal officials for help.

Ideally, they say the lot should be near the turnpike or I-95.

Accomando noted that in just the past three years, hundreds of tractor trailer operators moved into The Acreage once Miami-Dade and Broward counties ruled that they could not be stored in rural residential areas.

"The level of semi-tractor trailer traffic has significantly increased," she noted.



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