

The Special Meeting and Workshop of the City Council of the City of Panama City Beach, Florida, Board of County Commissioners, and the Tourist Development Council, held on August 13, 2019.

**SPECIAL MEETING AND WORKSHOP WITH BAY COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS AND THE TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL RELATED TO BEACH SAFETY AND RELATED ISSUES ON THE SANDY GULF BEACH**

ATTENDEES:  
CITY PANAMA CITY BEACH:  
MAYOR MIKE THOMAS\*  
COUNCILORS:  
PHIL CHESTER\*  
PAUL CASTO  
GEOFF MCCONNELL  
HECTOR SOLIS

BAY COUNTY BOARD OF  
COMMISSIONERS:  
PHILLIP GRIFFITTS, III, CHAIRMAN\*  
ROBERT CARROLL  
TOMMY HAMM  
WILLIAM T. DOZIER  
KEITH BAKER

CITY CLERK: MARY JAN BOSSERT

BAY COUNTY TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL:  
BUDDY WILKES, CHAIRMAN  
ANDY PHILLIPS  
CLAIR PEASE  
DAVID CHAPMAN

\*DENOTES THE ATTENDEE ALSO SITS AS MEMBER OF THE TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Mayor Mike Thomas called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.

Mayor Thomas gave the invocation and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor Thomas commented that the options for funding beach lifeguards have been an ongoing challenge. He spoke in favor of increased enforcement with fines and arrest of those ignoring the double red flag system. He discussed the statistics of drowning victims and the tragedies involving those attempting rescue of others.

TDC Chairman Buddy Wilkes stated the TDC has promoted public safety by contributing \$1 million every year between Bay County and the City of Panama City Beach, to fly the airplane banners with banners for red flag warnings, billboards, and information campaigns. Bay County Commissioner Griffiths commented they are here to listen and come to a solution. Councilman McConnell commented he requested the workshop to explore ideas to help keep the public safe on the beaches.

Councilman Solis stated he has been working on a double red flag ordinance for fourteen months. He commented during double red flags he witnessed Beach Patrol warn citizens to get out of the water and once the patrol left, the people would return to the water. He stressed the importance of education and enforcement in tandem. He explained his efforts working with condos to provide an online video explaining the flag safety system and rip currents hotel or condo guest's check-in online. He noted that a recent drowning victim had been warned five times to get out of the water.

Councilman Casto commented this is not a new problem for the Beach. He explained Bay County Tourist Development Tax and the inability for the County to currently asses any additional tax. Councilman Casto asked for the attendees to discuss seeking an amendment to a state law or other means of financing a lifeguard program.

TDC member Pease suggested using geofencing at restaurants to warn of dangerous conditions on the water. She stated that since the TDC began providing education cards at check-in, many guests have started checking in online. She suggested expanding the education initiatives for sea turtles to also distributing information about the beach flag safety system. She noted statistics that 59.3% of people don't know how to get out of a rip current, less than a third know the meaning of the flags, and that 38% of drownings involve alcohol.

Discussion ensued on ways to educate the public on the red flag warning. Possible solutions included posting the pictures of those caught in violation on Facebook, placing signage at all public access ways, exploring public and private funding opportunities, electronic notice of red flags, adding flag indicators to Turtle Watch program, placing signage on the garbage cans along the beach, and adding safety floatation devices at commercial locations.

Commissioner Griffiths cautioned that even with a floatation device a person not trained in water safety may endanger himself or others in attempting rescue.

Board Member Phillips noted that most of the drownings occurred from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. which would be after the lifeguards leave. He also noted that many of the beach services pay the HOA's to have access to the beach.

Councilman Chester noted the importance of tourism to the City's economy and the funding of the City through the business license tax. He cautioned against discouraging tourists from coming to the beach.

Councilman McConnell explained it is hard to compare Rosemary Beach which is 1.5 miles of private beach only accessible by those staying along the water, to Panama City Beach which has been historically open to the public everywhere.

Commissioner Dozier said education and enforcing the law are key to keeping the beach safe. It is also important to support those that are enforcing the law.

## PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Joe Hajik – 220 Summer Breeze Road. Mr. Hajik stated his 12-year-old is a Boy Scout and provided him with ideas for beach safety. Mr. Hajik passed out handouts. He suggested beach safety equipment on signs and placing buoys in the water.

There was discussion on the possibility of having an autodialer to notify 911 when safety equipment is removed.

Mr. Mike Landis – 14806 Front Beach Road. Mr. Landis stated enforcement is key and education is good. He suggested the Fire Department initiate a voluntary group to patrol the beach on double red flag days. He commented they could carry a life ring in a pick-up truck or 4-wheeler.

Another member of the audience said he would be willing to volunteer to inform beach visitors of the flag notices.

Ms. Alisha Redmond – Vernon. Ms. Redmon commented her husband died in June trying to help rescue swimmers struggling. She said she is pushing to pass a law that would charge parents of children under the age of 16 that are in the water during a double red flag with child endangerment.

David Vaughan, Safety Director for the South Walton Fire District, offered his assistance as a resource partner. He explained his program's funding and its contract with Walton County. He stated they currently patrol 10 publicly funded beaches as well as two privately funded beaches. He stated they have contracts with Rosemary Beach and San Destin. He explained the program runs 245 days from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. from March to October, with extended hours during high events.

Board Member Pease requested Mr. Vaughan to show a breakdown of their expenses.

There was a discussion on the requirement to spend TDC funds.

Commissioner Griffiths said the County previously calculated the costs of a lifeguard program totaling \$176.51 per linear foot or \$900,000 a mile for expenses and personnel.

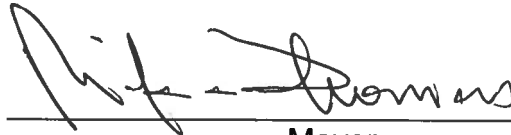
Bay County Sherriff, Tommy Ford, recognized the law enforcement men and women, Fire Dept., and EMS for the lives they save daily. He said on red flag days the Sheriff's Department sends a press release to all media outlets, flies the plane, and Surf Rescue Patrol is on the beaches. He noted that the TDC fully funds his office's beach enforcement program. He noted that most people comply with the warnings, however, if individuals do not get out of the water it is a challenge to enforce the ordinance. He commented three people were arrested this year.

Commissioner Griffiths explained at this time Bay County does not have additional funds to contribute to a lifeguard program, the TDC is restricted on how their funds are spent by the Legislature. He noted the difficulty in obtaining additional taxing authority from the Florida Legislature. He stated they should focus efforts on education and enforcement.

Mayor Thomas encouraged everyone to email suggestions to the board.

With nothing further, the meeting was adjourned at 2:17 p.m.

READ AND APPROVED this 12<sup>th</sup> of September, 2019.

  
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Mayor

ATTEST:

  
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City Clerk