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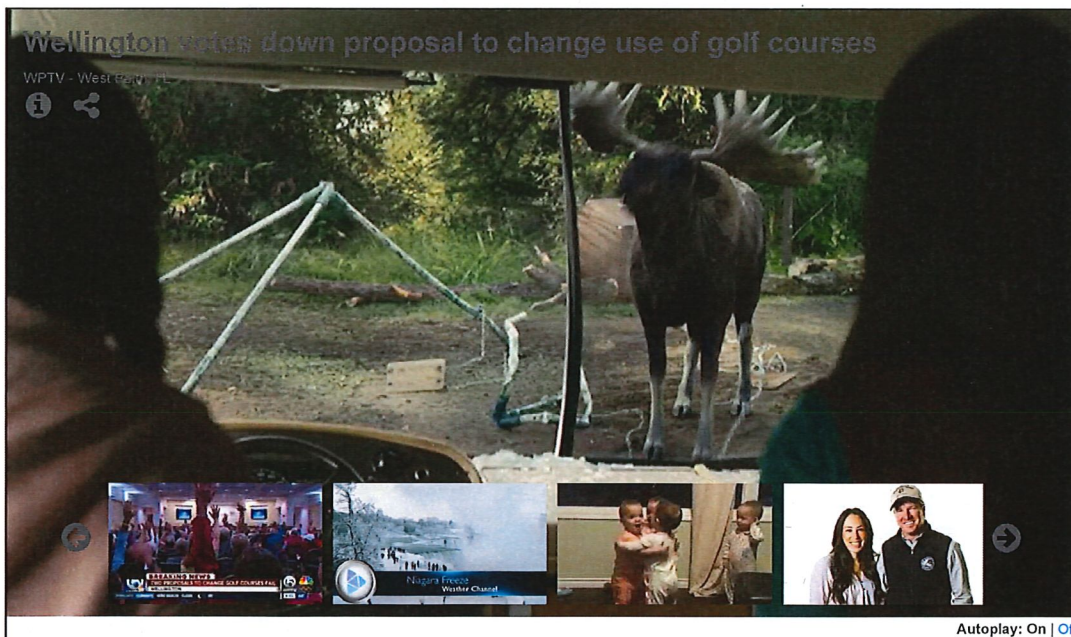
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NEW: Wellington denies Palm Beach Polo, Polo West golf course changes

LOCAL By Kristina Webb - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer



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WELLINGTON — In a contentious eight-hour meeting that started on Monday night but ran until nearly 3 a.m. Tuesday, the Wellington Village Council unanimously denied a pair of controversial proposals from developer Glenn Straub.

A standing-room only crowd filled council chambers and, numbering in the hundreds, overflowed into the halls and lobby. The majority wore various shades of red in opposition to proposals to make changes at Straub's golf

courses at two communities: Polo West and Palm Beach Polo Golf and Country Club.

Scores of people spoke or provided written comments opposing the proposals. Only four people spoke in favor: Straub; his attorney, Alec Domb; Gary Fellers, who operates the clubhouse and restaurant at Polo West; and Fellers' attorney.

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The council took the proposals separately.

For Palm Beach Polo, Straub sought to change the village's master plan to include field and equestrian sports in addition to golf on the golf courses and on property Straub owns along Stribling Way under the Florida Power & Light Co. power lines.

He also requested several new entry ways,, including two points to the power line property, service access to Birkdale Drive from the north end of the defunct north course, an exit from the north course to Royal Fern Drive behind the library, and right-in-right-out only access from Forest Hill Boulevard to the north course.

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At Polo West, Straub had requested a master-plan amendment to allow equestrian uses on the golf course. That application was changed early Monday, with Straub dropping a previous request to also include field sports. Straub also requested an entry point from the west side of his golf course to Greenview Shores Boulevard to meet up with the light at Wellington Community High School.

With the council's denial, the applications as submitted cannot be submitted again for two years.

'Entitled to access'

During the meeting, Domb said Straub was withdrawing the request for service access to Birkdale Drive from the north course, which ceased operating as a golf course about 17 years ago. But Domb argued that his client was entitled to the access point from Forest Hill based on a deposition given by a former Wellington village engineer in a lawsuit over access to the north course.

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Village Attorney Laurie Cohen disagreed, saying existing access through a tunnel that connects the north course to Straub's property on the south side of Forest Hill Boulevard was found to be sufficient access for the current use, according to that same lawsuit.

"I do not believe there is anything in the court's order that says that they are legally entitled to that access in the absence of more intense use," Cohen said.

Speaking after the council issued both denials, Domb insisted Straub is entitled to have access to his properties. "We're not done," Domb said. "We're entitled to access to our properties. And we were denied access to our properties for no good reason.

Domb also contended during the meeting golf courses are "dying," with Straub telling the council he loses \$1 million a year on the courses at Palm Beach Polo.



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But residents of both communities contended other golf courses are thriving. "Golf is not a dying sport. Poorly run golf courses are dying sports," said Palm Beach Polo resident Judy Mencher.

'Vague' requests

Residents said the additional access points at both Palm Beach Polo and Polo West would create safety and security issues. Where both neighborhoods are gated, many said they feared any new entry ways would provide a "back door" to circumvent the traditional guard house screening.

Opponents also argued the field and equine sports uses were "too vague," saying they opened the use of the land up to too many possible events.

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"The applicant through an amendment to the master plan proposes to allow a whole new category of uses, but you don't know what those uses are," said Michelle Mellgren, a certified planner hired by the Palm Beach Polo Property Owners Association. Neil Schiller, the attorney for the association, said the field sports category could allow for activities that "involve the catching or killing of animals for pleasure."

"I don't think anybody wants this activity next to their community," he added.

'An emphatic no'

In saying he would vote against the Palm Beach Polo requests, Councilman Michael Drahos said he didn't know "if I've ever seen a stack of (comment) cards that high." He added that in nearly six years on the village's Planning, Zoning and Adjustments Board and two years on the village's education committee before that, he had never seen an application "as one-sided as this one."

"For me this isn't just a no, it's an emphatic no," he said.

Later, in announcing his decision to vote to deny the Polo West requests, Drahos called on Straub to be a better neighbor to the homeowners surrounding his properties. "Is this truly the legacy you want to leave behind?" Drahos asked Straub, referring to the speakers who brought forward "one story sadder than the next."

While attorneys for the Polo West Homeowners Association declined to comment, Palm Beach Polo attorney Schiller said his clients are "very happy and appreciative" the council made the decision to deny the applications.

"They (the council) ultimately did the right, responsible thing and we couldn't be happier," he said.

Special-use permits

Straub still can apply for special-use permits to hold soccer matches at Palm Beach Polo and equestrian events at Polo West.

But Palm Beach Polo residents argued that the special-use permit allowing Straub to host soccer matches on the golf course just south of Forest Hill Boulevard should be revoked. They contended he has violated the terms of that permit, including failing to submit monthly attendance counts to the village, and to adequately screen portable restrooms from residents' view.

When asked by Vice Mayor John McGovern why Straub has not kept track of attendance at soccer games as required by the permit, Domb said the attendance is tough to track but Straub is trying.

Schiller said the Palm Beach Polo property owners would monitor the soccer games "and continue to keep them honest" when it comes to following the permit's rules.



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by Eliot Kleinberg, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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by Daphne Duret, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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