

'Overreaching' ordinance is challenged

Jackson County Commission meeting is packed by supporters of proposed change in regulation

BY KATIE GRIFFIN

kgriffin@clickthepaper.com

The June 16 Jackson County Board of Commissioners meeting had a audience packed with people showing their support of Greg Brockman's appeal for a change in the county ordinance requiring a permit for religious meetings on private property.

The commissioners' meeting room was filled to capacity.

Vice Chairman Dwain Smith called the meeting to order and then allowed Brockman to address the board with his concerns with ordinance in section 351 (d) entitled Religious Assemblies. The current wording of the ordinance reads "Religious services conducted on a site that is not permanently occupied by a religious assembly use, not to exceed a period of more than 15 days."

Smith presided at the meeting in the absence of Chairman Tom Crow.

"It was obvious to me that the ordinance could be used to intrude into citizens living rooms, into their homes," said Greg Brockman, pastor and leader of tent revivals across Northeast Georgia.

Brockman explained that



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Greg Brockman said he worries about the impact of the permit process on futrue generation if the potential for restriction of personal freedom is not addressed by amendment.

authority shortly after he was made aware of the ordinance and asked if he has five or so people over to play some worship music and have a Bible study, does that require a permit and the answer to that was yes it would require a permit.

"My opinion as a citizen of Jackson County is that this is overreaching, they're overreaching into my living

room, my home. I became a Christian in 1994 and since then I have had prayer meetings and Bible studies in my home and not once have I thought that I need to ask the government for permission. I don't want to have to do that now and I don't want my kids to have to do that," said Brockman.

He then read aloud from Article I, Section I of the Bill of Rights that states "Each person has a natural and inalienable right to worship God, each according to the dictates of that person's own conscience; and no human authority should, in any case, control or interfere with such right of conscience."

After reading this, the audience gave a round of applause. Brockman then thanked the commissioners for their willingness to work with them to get the wording of this ordinance changed. He explained that he understands this current board does not want to control the religious freedoms of Jackson County citizens but explained that 10 or 20 years from now the current leadership will not be here to protect these freedoms.

Brockman continued to say that last year, they had a

ORDINANCE

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revival for 30 days and, at the end of that revival, a Bible study resulted from it. This Bible study welcomed people who would not usually step foot into a church — methamphetamine addicts and drug addicts — but, at the home Bible study, they have somewhere to go to associate with other Christians and from there they can find a local church to attend.

“Now had this ordinance been enforced, it would have stopped this revival from continuing for 30 days. It would have stopped the revival after 15 days, and the Bible study would have never been formed and therefore the many people saved would have not been able to do so,” said Brockman.

The current ordinance can be interpreted in such a way to hinder religious freedom.

“We believe that home Bible studies and prayer meetings shouldn’t be hindered here. They should be a benefit to Jackson County, not a liability,” said Brockman.

County Attorney Christopher Hamilton then asked any present citizens to stand in agreement and everyone there participated in a standing ovation. The board then agreed to reevaluate the wording of this ordinance and to comply with the concerns of the citizens. Brockman suggested the wording of the amended ordinance state something similar to this:

“If all parking is provided on private property, if the assembly violates no pre-determined fire code or sound ordinances or any other ordinance or law already in place, then the assembly

doesn’t require a permit.”

Smith, who represents District 4, then said he saw no reason why the commissioners cannot work with Brockman and get together to look at the recommendation so that they can move forward in agreement with the citizens.

“I was born and raised on the east side of Jackson County and we had tent meetings there years ago and they’re not bad. I went to several of them. My father-in-law was a Pentecostal person who had prayer meetings at his house and there’s nothing wrong with it,” said Smith.

Lanier Martin, board member of the Congregational Holiness Church that represents more than 10,000 churches, addressed the commission saying that the current ordinance, if left unchanged, will hinder a new movement coming to Jackson County. There will be a new couple moving to Jackson County with a mission of reaching the unreachable people in Jackson County. This couple will welcome people into their home and others’ homes and host Bible studies so that the people who would not usually step foot into an actual church can get born again and established into a local church. There are 55 churches that are sponsoring the new couple.

“But this new movement cannot be limited to 15 days. They may have home meetings for one or two years, just as long as it takes to bring people to Jesus,” said Lanier Martin.

Smith then reassured them by saying that he is a Christian himself so he believes this is something very important and that the Board will certainly discuss further options to re-word the ordinance. Commissioners

Bruce Yates and Chas Hardy also thanked the audience for attending and said that they hope to see this many people at all of their meetings.

“If you’re not a part of your local government then somebody else will be, so please be involved,” said Yates.

“Things like this sometimes get lost in the shuffle. An innocent sentence in a book this thick can really throw a wrench in things when people are actually trying to do good,” said Hardy. “Thank you for coming and being an active participant in your government. Your community is what you make it, what you put into it is what you will get out of it.”

BACK TO THE AGENDA

The meeting then resumed with the agenda and the addressed the issue of the Jackson County Board of Family and Children Services which states that the five-year term of Henry Slocum on this Board expires June 30. The law requires that the county commission appoint a successor within 90 days after the vacancy occurs. Mr. Slocum has indicated that he would like to serve another five-year term, so Hardy made the motion to approve Slocum for this next term and it was passed unanimously.

There were also two requests for the rezoning. The first request was to rezone 48.65 acres at 2200 Savage Road in Bogart from a subdivision property to an agricultural property with just one home. The second request was to rezone .45 acres, owned by Wells Fargo Bank, located at 200 Old Commerce Road Extension in Athens. They requested to rezone this from commercial use to residential use. Since both properties are located in District 4, Commissioner Smith made a motion to approve both requests and they were approved unanimously.

The commission also approved the consent agenda which included approval of the bid award to Parker Traffic Marking for \$259,558.50.

The chairman was authorized to execute the contract.

Also on the consent agenda was the approval and authorization for the chairman to execute the 2015 capacity

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Greg Brockman

Pastor

JACKSON



HERALD

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BOC under fire over religious ordinance

BY SHARON HOGAN

A 2012 county ordinance came under fire Monday night after a group of citizens said it could limit religious freedom in Jackson County.

A crowd of over 100 people attended Monday's Jackson County Board of Commissioners meeting to show their opposition to the ordinance, which limits temporary religious assemblies, such as tent revivals, to 15 days per year.

Greg Brockman of Jefferson spoke for the group and called on the BOC to amend the ordinance.

"Our concern is that the language could be used to limit or monitor home

Bible studies, home church cell groups, home prayer meetings or any other small gathering that may be of a religious nature," he said.

Brockman said that in May, a group was holding a tent revival on private property on Hwy. 124 in West Jackson when someone from the county's code enforcement office came by and told the host that a permit was required.

Brockman said he had been involved with tent revivals and in-home Bible studies and prayer meetings for over five years and he was not aware a permit was required.

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"If you read the wording of this ordinance, it could reach into our own living rooms," Brockman said. "I think that is wrong."

Brockman said he understands that large gatherings may need parking and permits, but that small home study religious groups should not need permits.

"We believe that as American citizens and as citizens of the State of Georgia, we should not have to ask

any government agency or official for permission to have a few people over to our homes to pray or sing or study or what have you," Brockman said.

Loud applause and "Amens" could be heard several times throughout Brockman's presentation to the BOC.

Lanier Martin also addressed the BOC about the ordinance.

Commissioner Dwain

Smith said the county is in the process of updating its Unified Development Code (UDC) and urged five or six of those in attendance at the meeting to get together and come up with some recommendations to be considered during the updating process.

Commissioner Bruce Yates requested county staff to investigate the "religious gatherings" ordinance and report back to the BOC.



JACKSON COUNTY
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BROCKMAN ADDRESSES BOC

Greg Brockman (standing at podium), Jefferson, spoke to the Jackson County Board of Commissioners on Monday in opposition to a county ordinance that he said could limit religious gatherings in the county.

Photo by Sharon Hogan







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Those who filled the audience for the Jackson County Board of Commissioners' meeting on June 16 gathered on the Jackson County Courthouse steps for photographs in celebration of the outpouring of support for Greg Brockman. Below: Katie Griffin captured County Commissioners Bruce Yates and Dwain Smith, who presided over the meeting, county attorney Christopher Hamilton and Commissioner Chas Hardy as they listened to Brockman's appeal to amend the requirement for a permit for certain religious gatherings.

