

Public weighs in on Oconee noise rules

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
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WALHALLA — After hearing a mixed bag of opinions from various residents this week, county council will begin work over the coming weeks toward revamping Oconee's noise regulations based, in part, on that input. One thing seemed clear to most of the council members after Tuesday's workshop: Pleasing everyone would be impossible.

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Wayne McCall
Oconee County Council chairman

time and do this ordinance right, it's going to be so restrictive where we're going to be giving the crickets and

the hummingbirds tickets," council chairman Wayne McCall joked. In comparing Oconee's existing noise regulations to those from other municipalities, District 3 councilman Paul Cain suggested to his fellow members that "simpler is better" for noise

ordinances. "I'm looking at At-

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lanta's, and it's two pages long — it's shorter than ours," he said. "How in the world? Either they have a lot of people coming and complaining at their city council meetings, or it seems to work. Among those speaking during public comment, Foothills Community Church pastor Greg Oraham recommended council consider not only specific decibel levels, but also exemptions for places of worship.

"The ordinance, as I was reading it, did not have any kind of exemption for religious services," Oraham said.

Gary Littlefield, a Seneca resident who said he lives 600 feet away from The Tiki Hut on Lake Keowee, an outdoor restaurant and bar that hosts live music on weekends, said whatever decibel level council sets as the limit should be measured at the closest residential boundary line.

"I shouldn't have to sit in my living room and listen to 'The Tiki Hut,'" he said.

Jim Bennett, general manager of The Tiki Hut, said decibel readings are taken every night at the venue and also routinely checked at Littlefield's house, where he said the readings have typically been between 45 and 65 decibels.

But Bennett said the current noise regulations are too subjective, and when the bar had once received a ticket in the past, it was not shown a decibel reading that proved it was in violation.

"We're trying our best to be good neighbors with Gary and the rest of the people ... but we're a business, and we need that entertainment," he said. "We can't have unreasonable restrictions that we can't have entertainment.

"It's not a frat house, it's not a sorority house — it's a business, and that's how it's going to be run," he added.

Oconee County Chamber of Commerce director Jillian Lusk said she knew it was a complex issue, but asked council to take into consideration the need for objective criteria and to limit unnecessary restrictions or fees for businesses that might be hosting events on a regular basis.

Frankie Pearson, a Westminster resident and former council candidate, said council needs to be careful that it does not "shut down another business ... by tweaking the noise ordinance."

"If you're going to put limits on it, make them within boundaries that we all can live by," he said. "If you move into

a subdivision that has an amphitheater in the middle of it — deal with it. You knew it was there. ... If you move into a place that already has a business such as The Tiki Hut, you know the music's going to be loud."

Sound engineering consultant Chad Rawlings also spoke at the workshop at McCall's request and echoed a similar sentiment.

"If I chose to live on the lake, but then I didn't like the sound of boats, I kind of created my own problem," Rawlings said.

"You may be only to hear that band a mile away, but you only hear it at 65 or 70 decibels," he added. "Well, you know, lawnmowers make more noise than that. Are you going to stop your neighbor from mowing his lawn?"

Council members also weighed in with their opinions on the discussion.

"We know we want an objective standard," Cain said. "If they are having a concert, get out there and make sure it conforms to the law. But we also want it to be reasonable to those that may not want to hear a concert at that time."

Joel Thrift said he was not in favor of requiring permits or giving notices for outdoor entertainment.

"There is no right or wrong answer to this situation," Thrift said.

Reg Dexter said it would be ridiculous for council to need to account for all possible noises that can occur in the county.

"I expect to hear people's lawnmowers," he said. "I mean, that's part of living. Are we going to sit here and say lawnmowers can only be used on

certain days of the week between these hours? That doesn't make sense."

Rawlings summarized the night's discussion by pointing out two factors that council should be prioritizing — a curfew to help citizens "live at peace with one another" and the health and safety of the public, or setting a decibel limit that prevents the damage of hearing.

"My concern is we're going to write an ordinance based on a smattering of opinions, rather than facts and health and safety issues, which the law should protect all of us from," he said. "Wherever we live and wherever our residence is, it should also protect those who are making their living — and everyone should be reasonable in that way."

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FILE

The Tiki Hut on Lake Keowee in Seneca has drawn noise complaints from neighbors for its live music performances on weekends.