

'Best of both worlds'



SAVANNAH BLAKE | THE JOURNAL

From left, Paul Stovall, Nancy Johnston, Mike White and Tommy Hutchins listen during a recent meeting of local residents at a home in Lakewood Estates to talk about Seneca's new proposed short-term rental ordinance.

'They are nice people, but they're here for a party. They don't have time to learn the rules of the lake. They don't have time to build relationships with the neighbors. All those things make it possible to live in harmony with your neighbors. Those can't happen in a week.'

John Johnston
Lakewood Estates resident

Residents say they support city's short-term rental ordinance

BY NORM CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — While saying the city's proposed short-term rental ordinance is not perfect, some local residents who have argued against the ordinance during council meetings now say they support it.

"It's a much better ordinance than we started out with," said John Johnston, a resident of Lakewood Estates, which recently got approval from homeowners for an amendment in its protective covenants limiting short-term rentals to no more than four people in homes where the owner is present.

"We need the covenant plus the ordinance, because our covenant makes up for what the ordinance lacks," Johnson added.

Neighborhood resident Virginia

Bell, who shared concerns at a recent council meeting about the impact the rentals have had on her neighborhood, said she supports the ordinance.

"It's a neighborhood-city partnership that will empower everyone to be able to collaborate and enjoy the beautiful community," she said.

The city ordinance requires an application process that will create a "paper trail of ownership" for the short-term rental homes in the city, she added.

Lakewood Estates is the most recent of several homeowners associations in the city that have changed their covenants to make them more restrictive than the city's proposed ordinance, which could go before council for a final vote next week.

Neighborhood association cove-

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nants that are more restrictive than the city ordinance would supersede the ordinance in those communities, according to the ordinance and state law. City officials encouraged homeowners associations to amend their covenants if they wanted more restrictions.

Lakewood residents began working to amend their covenants after three of the eight homes on a section of Shorecrest Drive began being used as short-term rentals. Several residents from Lakewood and one from a nearby community met with The Journal recently to talk about the issue.

Lakewood got the last vote it needed to have enough to change the covenants from Seneca City Councilman Stuart Pohl, who lives on Shorecrest Drive.

"Their arguments were very convincing," Pohl said of his reason for supporting the change in the covenants. "I live at the very end of the street. I don't see the traffic. I don't hear the noise. The things they're experiencing I've never experienced. But after hearing them

come out and tell their story, I talked it over with the wife and we felt it was the best thing for the community."

Johnston said some of the renters on Shorecrest are often more like "house parties" designed to "maximize revenue" for those using their home for a business. He expressed concerns about the behavior of some renters.

"They are nice people, but they're here for a party," he said. "They don't have time to learn the rules of the lake. They don't have time to build relationships with the neighbors. All those things make it possible to live in harmony with your neighbors. Those can't happen in a week."

He added the change in the covenants mean there is someone in the home who "still cares about that house."

"It's really trying to maintain a residential set of relationships without keeping people from making a buck," he said. "You don't want to make life hard on people. You want to create conditions to make it possible to create a neighborhood and not a hotel. This seems like it kind of gives you the best of both worlds. Not the best, you



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From left, John Johnston, Virginia Bell, Nancy Johnston and Mike White speak with other local residents during a meeting recently at a home in Lakewood Estates in Seneca.

can't maximize revenue, (but) if you want to supplement your revenue you can do that."

Holly Hutchins said she was concerned that she, her husband and other longtime residents may leave without solutions to short-term rental problems.

"If our neighborhood continues to disintegrate, you will have flight," she said. "If the short-term rental situation doesn't get better, there could just be flight from the interior lots. If it gets bad, we don't have to stay there."

In nearby White Oak Point,

residents approved an amendment to their covenants allowing short-term rentals only for a minimum of 90 days. Mike White, a resident in that community, said he is concerned those renting a home for a few days or a week don't understand the rules around the lake.

"They think, 'I've got to maximize my vacation time,'" White said. "The thing is to go as fast as you can for as long as you can, because you're only there for three days."

"This is our neighborhood," he added. "There's been times all of us have had little kids

swimming and I wound up putting out extra floats to make sort of a barricade so people would know this is a place where there are little kids."

White said most residents "couldn't have anticipated" the impact of short-term rentals when they bought their homes.

"A lot of us thought we were safe from what we imagined to be an intrusion on residential communities under the label of business," he said.

Lakewood resident Tommy Hutchins said he has seen cars with renters driving fast in the community when they don't know the area, creating the potential for accidents. Johnston said he is also concerned about safety on the roads.

"The people along the waterfront lots are the ones with the potential to make money," he said. "We don't want that potential exercised in a way that ruins life for the lovely family down the street whose children walk up this street and come to our dock to swim. We want them to still be able to do that and not get run over."