

WORKSHOP

Lower Suwannee Refuge

Dixie County School Board Meeting Room

March 04, 2021 – 2:30 PM

While adhering to the CDC Guidelines and following State of Florida Executive Orders: 20-51 Establishing Response Protocol, 20-52 declaring a Public Health Emergency, 20-69 regarding Local Government Public Meetings and the Dixie County Emergency Declaration 2020-27. The Board will meet and limit access by staff and the public to the meeting room. The Board meetings are audio recorded. The public can hear and participate in the meeting via conference call by dialing 1(917)900-1022 and enter code 32628.

COMMISSIONERS

Jody Stephenson
Mark Hatch, Chairman
W. C. Mills
James Valentine
Jamie Storey, Vice Chairman

STAFF

Duane Cannon, County Manager
Michael Osteen, County Attorney
Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court
Jacki Johnson, Chief Financial Officer
Della Rhymes, Asst. Chief Deputy Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

The Board meeting was called to order at 2:45 PM by Commissioner Hatch.

INVOCATION AND PLEDGE TO THE AMERICAN FLAG

The Invocation was led by Commissioner Storey and the Pledge to the American Flag was led by Commissioner Mills.

Commissioner Hatch thanked everyone for coming to the workshop today. He said the reason they are here is because people have a lot of questions regarding the Suwannee Mainline.

Mr. Andrew Gude with the Lower Suwannee National Refuge appeared before the Board to address the questions and complaints for the off-road usage of the Suwannee Mainline. He said that per regulations the Suwannee Mainline is a refuge road and not for off road vehicle use. He said they have not been enforcing this in the past but lately the off-road use is becoming a problem. He said they will be enforcing the proper usage of the road. He said they are liable for what happens on this

road. He said if the person's vehicle is street legal with tags and registration then they are good to use the road for travel.

He said for slow speed vehicles their standards are higher. He said the road is currently open all the time and only closed when it's flooded; or trees are down for public safety. He said this road is very important for travel to Horseshoe, Shired Island, and Suwannee. He said this road is also used for an Emergency Evacuation Route.

Commissioner Stephenson asked if a "side by side" vehicle can get a license plate through the Tax Collector.

Commissioner Hatch asked if a sticker is possible for recreation use of the road. He said it is disappointing that they must deal with the few bad apples. He said the people in the community of Suwannee would like to continue to use this road.

Mr. Andrew Gude said they have put up signs regarding the regulations and have gotten many phone calls.

Commissioner Hatch asked what the Board can do to help. He said the County is grading this road. He asked if Mr. Gude could offer any slack to the people who want to use the road.

Mr. Gude said the public must follow our regulations.

Mr. Kenny Evans spoke to the Board. He lives in Suwannee and he uses the mainline a lot. He asked what needs to be done to meet their regulatory criteria to use the road. He said there is a Low Speed Registration through the State for vehicles that travel 35 MPH or less. He said the posted speed limit for the Mainline is 25 MPH. He asked if this would be acceptable.

Ms. Brenda Lacey spoke to the Board. She has a have a condo in Suwannee and she uses the road a lot. She also asked about having a sticker. She commented that large vehicles travel this road more than people with ATVs.

Mr. Andrew Gude clarified for everyone that they have not always enforced this. He said they have been issuing warnings. He said this road should not have any commercial use.

Officer Sterling stated there is a weight limit on the road.

Mr. Andrew Gude said he fears that something bad will eventually happen. He said his office and agents are in charge of managing the use of the road and there are regulations in place to be enforced.

Ms. Brenda Lacey asked if the DMV could require tag and insurance and issue stickers for "side by side."

Mr. Andrew Gude said the vehicle must be legal with the State of Florida.

Commissioner Stephenson said this may turn into a problem for use throughout the whole county. He said that some boundaries will need to be set for what is legal to drive and not drive.

Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler spoke to the Board. He said there are Florida Statutes that cover motor vehicles. He said that Golf Carts, UTV, and ATV vehicles are different.

He said there are different parameters to follow for what you can legalize on County Property and the right of ways. He said that County, State, and Federal roads all have different requirements for the legalization of a vehicle. He cautioned the County will need to be careful with this.

Commissioner Stephenson said the vehicle must have a license and insurance to drive on the mainline.

Commissioner Mills asked if the vehicles not having insurance is the problem.

Mr. Andrew Gude said the State Statutes must be followed. He said they don't want to collect money for the use of this road. He said they try to help with the expenses of the road maintenance.

Commissioner Mills asked if the off-road vehicle had a permit and passed inspection and was road worthy would this be allowed.

Mr. Andrew Gude replied the issue is that the people drive off the road.

Commissioner Mills suggested a permit for the use of the Suwannee Mainline only.

Commissioner Hatch asked if the county could issue a permit that covers this road only.

He said the Road Department maintains this road and the revenue from the permit could go to that department.

Commissioner Stephenson said most people are not going to trailer the "side by side" to the road and then unload it to ride. He said people will drive the off-road vehicles on other roads as well. He said there will always be a bad apple somewhere.

Ms. Brenda Lacey said there should also be a stipulation that you must be licensed driver. She said there are children driving these vehicles.

Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler said people must know the traffic laws.

Mr. Andrew Gude said there are also specific time frames to follow for access to different areas. Some areas are for daylight hours only and are closed after dark, but the Suwannee Mainline Road is open. He said they have not enforced this consistently for the past two years. He said that Officer Sterling has been patrolling this area and noticing more usage on this road. He said they know that good people also use this road and they don't want to take away their enjoyment of the road. He said more and more off-road vehicles are traveling this road.

Someone asked about hunting on Federal land with vehicles.

Mr. Andrew Gude replied there are regulations that prohibit non licensed use other than disabled hunters and fisherman.

Someone said they lived here since 2007 and many people travel this road and fast. He said that the FWC helped him out when he got stuck in the area. He asked if the local government could help so that everyone doesn't have to suffer.

Mr. Andrew Gude said he would be in support of help from the county, but the state regulations must be followed. He said they will advertise and try to educate everyone before they start issuing citations.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND CONCERNS

There were no comments or questions from the public at this time.

ADJOURN

Commissioner Mills made the motion to adjourn at 3:21 PM. Commissioner Storey seconded. Board approved.

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
DIXIE COUNTY, FLORIDA

ATTEST:

Mark Hatch, Chairman

Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk-Auditor

PLEASE BE ADVISED *that if a person decided to appeal any decision made by the Board with respect to any matter considered at such meeting or hearings, he/ she will need a record of the proceedings, and for such purpose, he/ she will need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based.*

“Persons with disabilities requesting reasonable accommodations to participate in this proceeding should contact (352) 486-4931 (Voice & TDD) or via Florida Relay Service at (800) 955-8771.”

The Board meets the first Thursday of each month at 10:00 AM and the third Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM. Individuals that would like to be placed on the agenda should call Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court, by 4:00 PM on the Friday Preceding the Board meeting, at (352) 498-1200.