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Morality Battle Carries On

By MARK HOLAN The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Opponents of the adult entertainment industry will have to wait a few more weeks for a vote on the tougher regulations they've been seeking for years.

On Wednesday, Hillsborough County commissioners postponed their scheduled vote on new land use, employee licensing and alcoholic beverage regulations of sexually oriented businesses.

If the rules are approved, the owners of nude dance clubs, bikini bars and X-rated video stores have vowed to immediately begin what they say will be a long and expensive legal fight.

County Attorney Renee Lee advised the board to delay its vote until Sept. 7 after adult industry attorney Luke Lirot submitted a pile of reports late Tuesday. Failing to give the reports due consideration, she said, could become part of a lawsuit against the county.

Commissioners conducted a public hearing about the proposed regulations anyway, which stretched more than three hours.

Lirot and four paid experts were given an hour to refute suggestions that the adult industry causes adverse secondary effects, such as reduced property values and increases in criminal activity.

Lirot and attorney Lawrence G. Walters suggested the county meet with industry representatives to fashion a compromise of more narrowly tailored rules.

"You may end up with a legal battle that could take several years and cost six or seven figures," Walters said.

Tennessee attorney Scott Berghold, hired by the county to draft the regulations, and his paid criminology expert got another hour to rebut the industry and make their case that the proposed rules don't violate constitutional protections of free speech.

"This is not a rush to judgment, it's been a measured process, Berghold said.

The balance of the hearing was devoted to the comments of more than two dozen county residents given two minutes each to speak for and against the proposed rules.

Kevin Wright, nearly in tears, said, "It's traumatic to me that I have to argue for wholesomeness."

Several speakers who identified themselves as church ministers said they've counseled young women who regretted becoming dancers or seen families shattered by pornography.

Tampa evangelist Larry Keffer said the ministers were abdicating their responsibility to the commissioners. "The Christians need to wake up there and get out there," he said. "The laws that are being broken are God's laws."

Strip-club owner Joe Redner, who is running for county commission, said the board should focus on "overcrowded school, traffic gridlock and environmental rape."

Marc Randazza urged the board against following what he called an anti-freedom agenda.

"Take the people of Tampa off the chessboard," he said. "This is where the Taliban and Nazis began."

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