

Vacation rentals OK'd for weddings

Hearing officer said nothing in code prevents them

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People who own vacation rental homes in Islamorada are free to hold weddings there, with few exceptions, a code compliance hearing officer ruled this week.

Hearing officer Michael J. Pawelczyk issued his ruling Tuesday saying neither Islamorada's vacation rental ordinance nor its land development code contain any language that prohibits or limits vacation rental home owners from allowing weddings at their properties.

"That's where we lost," George Martel, the Village of Islamorada's code compliance officer, said in an interview.

Martell issued Terri and Kevin Melilli a citation in August for advertising their oceanfront vacation rental home at mile marker 83 on the Old Highway as a commercial wedding venue, even though it's located in a residential neighborhood. Martell issued the citation after receiving complaints from a neighbor.

In his order, Pawelczyk said that the Melillis had to remove references to weddings on their online advertisements, which they did after receiving the citation this summer. Pawelczyk also ruled that the Melillis must not allow guests to park vehicles off the property.

But otherwise, Pawelczyk wrote, there is no evidence to suggest the Melillis are offering their home as a commercial wedding venue.

For instance, he said, they do not profit from catering, music services, chair and table rentals, "or other services used by renters hosting weddings at the property, and no evidence was produced during the hearing to indicate that [Terri Mililli] does anything more than provide contact information for such service providers in the area."

Martell cited the Melillis after receiving complaints from their next door neighbor, Cyd Nielsen. Nielsen wrote in her complaints that the 15 weddings at the Melilli's property between Oct. 16, 2010 and July 31, 2011 were disruptive. Nielsen nor Melillis could be reached for comment.

Debbie Pierog, who owns Caribbean Catering, praised Pawelczyk's decision. She said that weddings not only benefit businesses like hers, but they also have a trickle-down effect on the entire Upper Keys economy. She said wedding guests often stay for days and weeks and spend money at local stores, bars and restaurants. And guests often pay to go on charter fishing and diving trips.

Pierog said many people who live next to rental homes holding weddings don't have problems with the situation. She said that the weddings are shut down by 11 p.m., and there is a police officer on site to ensure guests don't misbehave. She also said neighbors are often invited over to join in the festivities.

The decision was also hailed by the Islamorada Chamber of Commerce. Cale Smith, the chamber's president, said Wednesday that conservative estimates show weddings and the runoff business they produce bring about \$12.5 million a year into the local economy.

"Weddings have such a huge impact on Islamorada's economy as a whole," Smith said.

The fall is a popular season for weddings in the Keys, Smith said, which brings welcome money to town at a time when business in the area is otherwise typically slow.

Last Thursday evening, Village Councilman Ted Blackburn said at a townhall meeting in Lower Matecumbe Key that holding weddings at vacation rental homes puts hotels, motels and other businesses that "went through the proper avenues" at a disadvantage.

But at that same meeting Deb Gillis, who owns several Islamorada motels, said only members of the wedding party typically stay at the

vacation rental home. All the other guests, which can be up to 100 people, stay in area motels and hotels, she said.

"The rental owner is not the only one making money," Gillis said. "It's scattered all across the community."