

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Palm Beach County keeps tougher rules for places of worship

Proposal would have made it easier to build or expand

By Andy Reid, Staff writer

December 8, 2009

Community groups, worried about more traffic, noise, lights and other neighborhood inconveniences, fought the proposed change to county rules that would have made it easier to build or expand places of worship near homes.

The change would have allowed churches, synagogues and mosques to avoid taking their building plans before the County Commission, where neighbors could voice concerns and try to win concessions ranging from limiting hours of operation to requiring more parking.

County lawyers sought to change the approval process in response to recent federal court rulings, aimed at protecting the First Amendment freedom of religion. Commissioners were cautioned that the county's current approval process for places of worship could be considered too restrictive and lead to costly litigation.

But residents who clashed with past church building plans weren't buying that argument and encouraged commissioners to protect the public hearing process.

"The existing process has worked very well," said George Humphries, who contends his neighborhood on Gun Club Road west of West Palm Beach relied on the current rules to negotiate agreements with expanding churches. "I find it hard to believe that's a violation of the First Amendment."

The Coalition of Boynton West Residential Associations argued that the current process of requiring a public hearing allows representatives of neighborhoods and places of worship to negotiate compromises to address parking and other concerns.

"Someone exercising their rights should not trample the rights of adjacent property owners," Ken Lassiter, COBWRA president, said.

County commissioners agreed. After delaying the rule change in October, they dropped it Tuesday.

Despite the advice of county attorneys, commissioners kept the rules in place. Should legal challenges arise, they could still make a change.

"When something is not broken, you don't look to fix it," Commissioner Chairman Burt Aaronson said.

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

Copyright © 2009, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)