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Trailer Estates to talk Sunshine

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Several Trailer Estates residents angry with elected officials over possible Sunshine Law violations won a small victory this week after the park's governing board decided to brush up on the law during a workshop next month.

A seminar scheduled for May 12 will give the park's nine elected officials as well as residents a refresher on a law that governs most public business and elected officials' conduct. Trailer Estates' board oversees an annual budget of almost \$1 million, collected from a special tax assessment for residents of the retirement community on the shores of Sarasota Bay, near the Bayshore Gardens neighborhood.

The board was scheduled to have a workshop on the law in January, but it was cancelled when no new members were elected to the board the previous month.

John Vander Molen, vice chairman of the board, said the meeting comes not from residents' requests but on the advice of the park's attorney, Mark Barnebey. The Bradenton lawyer sent a letter to the board last week suggesting an update, since it has been 18 months since the last refresher.

The board is also close to adopting an electronic document management program to make public records easily available to anyone with an Internet connection. The park's current records system is bulky and expensive and has been another source of resident displeasure. The new software could cost up to \$15,000, Vander Molen said.

"The goal there is quicker retrieval of records, rather than looking them up in file cabinets or folders," Vander Molen said. "The eventual goal is to have everything electronically available for office staff and, ultimately, for the public."

After reading a story on the Sunshine Law in the Bradenton Herald last month, several Trailer Estates residents voiced concern that the park's public records were difficult to obtain and that officials sometimes discussed park business outside board meetings. A spark of controversy turned into an all-out storm April 7, when the Herald reported the possible Sunshine violations and two groups supporting and opposing board members rallied outside the neighborhood post office.

Board actions spurred by the publicity seem to have addressed some major concerns, said Sharon Denson, who has led the charge to bring the board into compliance. She also thinks the new records-keeping system will "cost some money," but that it will be money well spent.

"I'm very pleased with going forward and having the workshop," Denson said. "It's unfortunate that we didn't have it in the beginning of the year. Maybe all of this wouldn't have happened. The education would have solved all our problems."

Vander Molen, who has said the park is worse off for spending money on legal advice related to the Sunshine Law, stood by those words Tuesday.

"We're all aware of (the Sunshine Law)," Vander Molen said. "But (critics) seem to think we're not and that this is a perfect world. But the world is not perfect. We can make better use of those funds for improving the swimming pool or the grounds."

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