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Trailer Estates briefed on Sunshine Law

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Trailer Estates' embattled board of trustees Monday held a refresher course on the Sunshine Law that governs them.

Whether it opened any eyes is debatable.

Despite some objections to having the meeting when the bulk of park residents are gone to their northern homes, seven of nine trustees and a handful of park residents listened to Trailer Estates' attorney Mark Barnebey discuss the nuances of the law for more than an hour and a half. Barnebey recommended the seminar last month after the board's vice chair and most prominent member, John Vander Molen, told the Bradenton Herald that the board's Sunshine compliance could be better.

It's unclear whether the drawn-out discussion was enough to effect any real change, as several board members said they didn't discover much.

"I learned things I already knew," said trustee Mary Lou McNulty.

"I learned exactly what you heard here today," Vander Molen said. He declined to comment further.

"It was enlightening what we can talk about and do," said trustee Joe Bigley. "We try to fulfill the Sunshine Law, but we don't exactly do it. We're just hillbillies."

Several residents have voiced concern over the behavior of some of their special district's elected officials and the park's handling of public records. They say the board conducts itself more like a homeowners' association than a local government overseeing a \$1 million annual budget.

Still, there were some trustees who said the refresher was informative and who wanted to know more about the law when all Trailer Estates residents can benefit from a future seminar.

Trustee Bruce Smith, who said the timing of the seminar was all wrong, submitted a letter to the board stating the workshop was scheduled and attorney's fees approved for the seminar without a vote of the board. "Some could question whether this decision was made in the Sunshine or by a group of trustees in the back room," he wrote.

Asked if he learned anything from the Sunshine refresher, Smith answered, "Yes, that we have more to learn."

Pam Cole, the trustees' treasurer, plans to request another seminar for the fall when snowbirds have returned. She said many in the park are confused over how the Sunshine law applies to special committees and could benefit from a later discussion.

"To me the Sunshine Law is common sense," Cole said. "Most of the bickering is personalities clashing. No one's trying to do anything illegal. They're just not as informed as they need to be."

The Legislature formed the Trailer Estates special taxing district in 1969 so that residents could pay an annual fee for the upkeep of recreational facilities and other amenities. The fee for the average homeowner is less than \$800 a year, and most agree that's reasonable for the perks they receive.

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