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Panhandle city reverses itself, allows flags on right of way

306 words
30 June 2000
12:38 PM
Associated Press Newswires
APRS
English
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CALLAWAY, Fla. (AP) - After a public outcry, city commissioners reversed themselves and are allowing a real estate broker to place small U.S. flags on street rights of way for Independence Day.

The commissioners, in an emergency meeting Thursday, voted 4-1 to allow the flags although each includes a tag with the name and logo of Tom Neubauer's business, ERA Neubauer Real Estate Inc.

The commissioners two days earlier had declined to consider an exception to an ordinance that prohibits advertising on the right of way.

Neubauer has distributed thousands of miniature flags in that manner across Bay County every July 4th for more than a decade. He said this year was the first time he was told he needed permission from Callaway, which is near Panama City.

Commissioner Thomas Lee said he still believes the tag constitutes advertising but voted to permit the flag placement because he is "representing the people."

"In this particular instance, the flag issue has never been the issue of the flag," Lee said.

The meeting room was half filled with citizens, many holding flags, in support of Neubauer who contends the tag is not advertising because it contains neither his address nor phone number.

"I am looking forward to getting a new flag because obviously I need one," resident Kathie Spitz said as she held up a dingy old flag.

Commissioner Mike Jones and Mayor Ray Boevink wanted to approve the flags Tuesday but Jones' motion failed to get a second. Jones cast the lone dissenting vote Thursday because he felt the commission should have allowed the flag distribution to continue in future years.

"I regret this was so controversial," Neubauer said. "I could have worked this out a little more before I came before the board."

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30 June 2000

02:45 AM

Associated Press Newswires

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(West Palm Beach-AP) -- The Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office has released several documents, including a letter a 13-year-old boy charged in the fatal shooting of English teacher Barry Grunow wrote the teacher. In the letter, seventh-grader Nathaniel Brazill's tells the teacher that the school year had been awful and he was considering killing himself. The letter and other documents released yesterday paint a picture of a boy dealing with the pressures of adolescence and struggling in some classes at school. The records also shed light on Brazill's state of mind on May 26th. That was the day he and another student were sent home from school year for throwing water balloons. Brazill later returned to the school with a silver .25-caliber Raven pistol stolen from his grandfather's bedside table and shot Grunow.

(Miami Beach-AP) -- Health officials have re-opened most of the beaches closed nine days ago by a giant sewage spill. And it comes just in time for tourists and residents to make plans for the Fourth of July weekend. The ban had threatened to keep tourists and locals out of the Atlantic during the upcoming July 4th, but health officials say they were encouraged by the results of the latest water samples and decided to re-open more beaches. Initially, 25 miles of beaches were closed after a pipe burst June 20th. A contractor drove a concrete piling through the sewage pipe, dumping an estimated 25 million gallons of raw human waste into an inlet just west of Miami Beach. The immediate area around the spill remains closed.

(Orange Park-AP) -- Clay County authorities are looking for suspects who vandalized the graves of two former members of the Southern rock group Lynyrd Skynyrd. Authorities were called to Jacksonville Memory Gardens about 3 a-m yesterday when someone reported hearing activity in the cemetery. When they arrived, they found the graves of Ronnie Van Zant and Steve Gaines had been vandalized. Van Zant and Gaines were killed when the band's airplane crashed October 20th 19-77. Sheriff's department spokeswoman Mary Justino says Van Zant's casket was pulled from a tomb to the ground. She said she felt the remains of Ronnie Van Zant were NOT disturbed because the hinges and the lock on the casket were intact. Justino also said the cremated remains of Gaines had been spilled, but cemetery officials believe 99 percent of the remains were recovered.

(Callaway-AP) -- A real estate broker must now look for another way to promote his business since he's been barred from placing miniature U-S flags on the city right-of-way. The flags celebrating Independence Day also have tags with the name and logo of his company on them. City commissioners decided the signs are advertising and -- therefore -- illegal. Tom Neubauer of E-R-A Neubauer Real Estate Incorporated had sought approval for the flags that his business has been placing in various parts of Bay County for more than a decade. Neubauer says his company has places thousands of flags along streets and in neighborhoods before every July 4th. He says this year is the first time he was told he needed approval and that he could face a heavy fine if found in violation of city ordinances.

(end newswatch)

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