

Let the golf carts roll

Jasper Council opens back streets

By Dan Pool

Jasper's city council voted unanimously Monday night to open some back streets in the city to golf carts. The action came during a regular council meeting following lengthy discussion that included profes-

sional growth planners, petitions, counter petitions, safety concerns, and a detailed reading of the new ordinance.

A phrase repeated by both the planners and Mayor John Weaver was that "golf carts are

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FISHING DAYS PROCLAIMED -- Council and Mayor officially recognize the fishing day event. Above (l-r) are John Foust, Allison Ballew, Jim Looney (all council members) Sportsmen Club representative Jerry Steele, Mayor John Weaver and council members Anne Morrow and Tony Fountain.

the tip of the iceberg," a phrase that seemed apropos to the situation on many different levels.

As the discussion unfolded, the desire to allow "low speed motorized vehicles" on Jasper backstreets began with two women, Joanne Finch and Cheryl Dean, who have cruised around on their carts for several years. From there, the issue escalated to where the city saw and planners said golf carts might be the key to smarter city planning and economic resurgence in downtown Jasper.

The woman rode for years on streets around their Piney Woods homes to visit each other and neighbors. They noted they waved to police officers at various times on their regular rides with no consequence.

But the unpermitted vehicles became an issue when someone was denied the right to ride an ATV on the roads in the same neighborhood.

With the carts versus ATVs issue, Jasper Police Chief Harold Cantrell determined there is legislation to permit "low speed motorized vehicles" on Georgia roads as long as they are only used on roads with speed limits less than 35 miles per hour. After that, the council began drafting a statute to allow the carts but with limitations on where they can be driven and a requirement that operators have a valid drivers license.

Jasper Mayor John Weaver said at first this was just a small isolated issue with one neighborhood.

In an odd coincidence, one of the finalists in the city flag design contest was employed by a growth planning company with a long list of clients, including Roswell, Big Canoe and Ball Ground.

David Carney had attended a meeting on the flag designs and got word of the golf cart issue. His co-workers view carts as a positive transition for smart growth and revitalizing a downtown area, he said.

Mayor Weaver said when Lew Oliver of the same planning company first called him about the golf carts, all he could think of was how to get off the phone. But in talking with Oliver, the mayor soon realized expanding golf cart use in Jasper might really be "the tip of the iceberg" to improve both growth planning and to increase business in town.

Oliver, Carney and Scott Ball from the planning group all spoke to the council Monday about how golf carts and other

forms of alternative transportation are keys to planning for growth and downtowns in a sustainable and economically desirable manner. They said golf carts allow the elderly and teens more transportation options and are perks favored by many people in areas like Peachtree City.

Oliver said paths, streets focusing on golf carts, bicycles and pedestrians rather than cars are an emerging trend in sustainable communities, including the new area of Big Canoe and the revitalization of Ball Ground his firm is working on.

Weaver said after hearing Oliver on the phone, "Knowing that we have vacancies in downtown blocks and with people asking what the mayor and council are going to do about it [I was more interested]. We are here to discuss just the golf carts tonight but also to look at what golf carts might do for downtown. Just two of those planned communities would fill up every restaurant in town."

The council only permitted golf cart usage on select, lower-speed roads in the Piney Woods subdivision area at Monday's meeting. But other areas can petition to be permitted for golf cart travel if they meet the low speed criteria.

In future planning, Weaver said he would like to incorporate golf carts in accessing downtown. At the meeting, he said he hopes to figure out a way to safely get golf carts "from Piney Woods to the Piggly Wiggly" as the next step.

Several residents of the Piney Woods area presented views and petitions, both for and against, golf carts.

Finch and Dean both spoke of how the slower vehicles provide a great social outlet. They said in all the riding they have done, neither has had any close calls with vehicles encountered, and "you meet people you would never meet in a car," Finch said.

Alice Reynolds presented a counter-petition saying there were safety issues with allowing carts on roads, and someone will get hurt if carts are allowed.

Stephen Daniels said he would like to get one of the golf carts but only if he felt roads could be regulated to make them safer.

Weaver and Police Chief Harold Cantrell said slowing all motorists will be the key to maintaining a safer environment.

Council member Tony Fountain said people already walk, let their kids play and ride bicycles

in roads, and a golf cart is surely safer than those forms of transportation.

He said there could be some issues at first, but once residents get used to seeing carts, it will likely slow all motorists and produce safer roads.

Weaver said allowing golf carts may produce a "shockwave" at first but in the long run will create opportunities for growth and safer, quieter neighborhoods.

All council members voted in favor of allowing the "low speed motorized vehicles" on selected roads (all in the Piney Woods area at this time). Council members are Fountain, Jim Looney, Allison Ballew, Anne Morrow, John Foust.

Cart permits should be available at City Hall in about 10 days. There will be a permit fee to get the required sticker to place on a golf cart or other vehicle that meets requirements of the ordinance.

In other action during the May Council meeting:

- Offer of lake property declined: Following a negative report from an engineer, the council declined to accept a lake at Emerald Lane being offered by the owner. The lake was being considered as a possible future water source for the city.

The engineer's report said the dam would need work that might only cost a couple thousand dollars but could prove to be much more extensive and possibly include full replacement. The engineer also said that while he conducted no water tests, there is concern that with homes surrounding the lake all relying on septic tank systems, that could create water issues in the lake. The council voted unanimously to decline the lake.

Fishing Days proclaimed -- Marking the 20th annual Fishing Days, the Mayor and Council officially proclaimed June 3rd through the 5th as Community Fishing Days at Cove Creek. The days-long event, which drew 500 kids last year, has been sponsored by the Pickens Sportsmens Club since it began. Besides Saturday fishing for youngsters, there is one day for the elderly and one day for those with handicaps to enjoy fishing for trout in the creek with assistance, equipment and food offered to those who attend the free event.

Jerry Steele of the Pickens County Sportsmens Club expressed the club's appreciation for the city's cooperation.