

## ELECTRONIC BINGO



Daily Mountain Eagle - Ed Howell

Bucky Rizzo of the Walker County Political Accountability Association talks to more than 200 people at a meeting Monday concerning a possible bingo hall locating in the area.

# Concerns expressed about potential bingo hall

By ED HOWELL  
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SUMITON — Landowners wanting to sell a site for a proposed electronic bingo hall in the Sumiton area were furious Monday after not being invited to speak at a public meeting of people against the proposal, while the city's mayor claimed the project was in the city limits and had been stopped in construction.

At the Sumiton Senior Center, an overflow crowd of more than 200 people gathered to hear speakers sponsored

by the Walker County Political Accountability Coalition and Concerned Citizens of Sumiton.

The land in question is just off Highway 78 on Rouse Road, behind the Red Barn Animal Clinic and next to the Ivy League Day Care, about 1/10th of a mile west of the county limits. It comes as bingo halls have continued to edge closer to the east side of the county, with a cluster of about three on Highway 78 roughly a little more than a mile from the city limits.

Sumiton Mayor Petey Ellis

said he thinks the land was zoned for an animal kennel or a storage building — but that it was definitely in the city limits. Eddie Tucker, a resident who lives behind the half-finished structure, said he lives in the city limits.

Ellis and Councilwoman Joeletta Barrentine said they opposed opening any electronic bingo hall in the city and would oppose de-annexation as a means to allow the bingo hall to operate.

Ellis said the city has an anti-gaming ordinance and that he has sent a copy to city

attorney Eddie Jackson and the Alabama League of Municipalities to get confirmation that the ordinance could be used to prevent the facility from opening up.

Tracy McMichens and her mother, Patsy, who reside across the county line in Jefferson County, said outside the meeting hall that they owned part of the land in question. They said they owned 4.5 acres that Johnny Bolen was going to buy. Ellis identified Bolen as a representative of the bingo hall who

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had approached him about the project.

"I probably have lost the sale. I'm sorry I don't tell other people what they can do, and to whom they can sell," Patsy McMichens said. "I am consulting with an attorney. I'm not a Christian. I am a good honest hard-working person. I am what you see. I don't lie. I don't cheat. I don't steal. But I am not a Christian and I will never be one because I do not approve of Christians pushing their Christianity on someone else."

Tracy McMichens said although Ellis was "blowing and bragging" about how the property was in the city limits, she showed a copy of a letter dated at a time when she said the family tried earlier to sell the property. The Oct. 1, 1999, letter from City Clerk Judy Glover stated that she was unable to find any records of the property being annexed into the city, nor could a previous 35-year city clerk recall that happening.

A comparison between a copy of the letter and city records or officials' recollections was not possible prior to the print deadline.

"It's awful funny how (Ellis) can change horses in midstream before an election," Tracy McMichens said. "He got up and said what would sound good to the electors."

She said the owners of the Red Barn Animal Clinic assumed in 1998 they were not in the city limits and went through the annexation process to get into the city.

The women said they also spent a number of hours Monday morning in the

Walker County Courthouse researching records. They said the only thing the city can use for evidence on their side is a map.

The following Tuesday after the developers first approached him, Ellis said county 911 maps and courthouse maps demonstrate that the land was "definitely" in the city. He said a legislator took the property into Bethel Road, although the McMichens later denied that.

Records, including a legislative act that Ellis claimed annexed the property, are supposed to be filed in probate to go to the tax assessor but were not found, Tracy McMichens said. The women said they went all the way back to 1954 files to try to find the records.

The women said they felt they have been treated harshly, indicating they did not know what they would do next, although it might end up in litigation.

Monday afternoon, Barrentine said the idea of de-annexing has not been talked about among the city's elected officials.

"That has not been discussed at a formal meeting. I haven't discussed it with any other council member," she said.

Barrentine said she is for annexing into the city when it helps and would base any decision on how it helps the city.

"I don't see how de-annexing that property would help the city," she said.

Earlier in the meeting, Tucker said he and his neighbors formed a group to stop the bingo hall when they learned about it, calling state

Sen. Charles Bishop, R-Arley, who has been fighting bingo for months. Bishop then got the neighbors in touch with the Walker County Political Accountability Association.

"We are against gambling in our city and we expect our city officials to uphold the ordinance in our city prohibiting gaming establishments. We believe that if this bingo casino is allowed to open in our city, it will have a domino effect and more and more casinos will try to open in our city," Tucker said. "You need look no further than the town of Argo to illustrate this fact."

"Would you want your children or your grandchildren to attend a daycare that is next to a casino?" Tucker asked. "Would you want a casino next door to your house, devaluing your property?"

Ellis said he wanted to shoot down a rumor that the bingo hall is a done deal and that Ellis was getting \$60,000 out of the deal.

"If you've told that, you're telling a lie," he said. "I've not taken anything, and I am opposed to bingo gambling in the city of Sumiton."

He went on to say if a vote was held, he would vote against the project, including any effort to de-annex. He said under the current climate, he didn't think any de-annexation would pass in the city.

The other four council members were not present at the meeting. It was pointed out Councilman Kenneth Russell was on vacation.

Within the past month, on a Thursday, Ellis said developers of the bingo hall approached him with tax records over the past five

years showing no city tax for the area had been paid in the city. He said that may be the case, but he believed the land was in the city and that they needed to confirm that before developing.

"Needless to say they went on with their plans, and that was the first knowledge of anything they were doing," he said.

Ellis said developers, once they learned of the resolution, went beyond what was permitted to do with the land. That violation included pouring concrete and built a wall. Ellis said he told him Friday to stop altogether.

"There was a load of trusses delivered today, and we would not let them unload those trusses. They took those trusses back where they came from. At this point, they can't get a license to deliver anything on site," he said.

"The permit he got to put this building back cost I think an expenditure of \$20,000. It was not to allow him to enlarge the building, pour concrete or do any of the work he did," he said. "I evidentially made a mistake and believed that whatever was told to me would happen, and that's not the case."

Ellis said Sumiton's anti-gaming ordinance was essentially a 1993 ordinance that the city of Jasper uses. He made the developers aware of the ordinance, which he said will likely be challenged by the developers in court.

Participants talked about coming to the July 15 city council meeting, although Ellis asked people to get on the agenda and appoint one spokesperson.

# Plans

dismissed experts.

families, eliminating special tax breaks for big corporations, renegotiating trade

cited his plans to cut the estate tax, although Democrats note that it applies to few Americans