

County collects \$1 million in fees from bingo

By ED HOWELL
Eagle Senior Writer

The latest numbers from the Walker County Probate Judge's Office shows that \$958,500 has been collected from the licensing of electronic bingo machines at 21 bingo halls, although some have closed or been denied operation.

The majority of funds from one bingo hall were paid to the courts, which pushes the figure past \$1.1 million.

Walker County has 16 halls with about 300 charities benefiting from the games. According to reports, games in Walker County were generating \$60 million a year in revenue, with some bingo halls grossing as much as \$1 million a month.

The Walker County Commission — which is meeting at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday to discuss new bingo operating rules — raised the license fee last year from \$50 a gaming machine to \$500. The commission had expected to collect \$1 million from 2,000 electronic bingo machines. Dividing into the figure already collected, the county apparently has collected from 1,917 machines.

A printout of the bingo halls, obtained late last week, does not show the owners of the halls, as Chief Clerk Rita Taft of the Walker County Probate Judge's Office said that information could not be released. Taft said some owners run more than one of the halls on the list.

The largest amount of license revenue for the county came from 2B LLC (Charity Bingo of Walker County) at 9448 Highway 78 East, which paid \$262,500. That would amount to 525 machines, a quarter of all the machines — and revenue — from electronic bingo halls in the county. The second highest on the printout was Highway 78 Charity Bingo at 4561 Highway 78 East, with \$133,500 in revenue and 267 machines.

Another bingo hall is in the six figures, but not on this list. The smallest license revenue on the list

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was \$2,500 for Walker County Bingo LLC at 10560 Highway 78. However, county license inspector Jerry Stricklin said that establishment, not knowing how a suit filed by Sheriff John Mark Tirey and District Attorney Charles Baker would affect matters, paid just enough to the Probate Judge's Office to get a license to display and then paid the balance it owed, more than \$160,000, to the courts handling the suit.

Baker and Tirey have filed in Walker County Circuit Court to get a declaratory judgment on the legality of electronic bingo machines in the county, claiming the current constitutional amendment and laws for bingo in Walker County are vague concerning the legality of electronic bingo. A ruling is expected later this year, although a couple of other lawsuits have been filed in the county, and another in the Bessemer area has already received written arguments.

If the court rules in favor of allowing the machines in the Tirey/Baker suit, the \$160,000 from Walker County Bingo would then go to the county, Stricklin said. If machines are ruled illegal, the hall would get its money back. If no decision is made by the start of the new fiscal year in October, the county would still get the \$160,000.

Stricklin said the Dreams Come True bingo hall, the only hall which has not resolved payment for this fiscal year, has been given until March 1 to pay for its license.

Also, Helping Hands Charity Bingo paid \$28,500 for licensing to start a bingo hall on 27595 Highway 69 North, but the county turned down its application for a bingo hall because the same company cannot have bingo halls at separate locations, Stricklin said. The hall operates another location at "20 Pineywoods Sipsey" (according to the license revenue list), which has paid \$40,000 in licensing.

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