

Columbia County's Rum Island Park Rules & Fees on Center Stage in Fort White

July 13, 2020



Friends of Rum Island, led by Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson, gather out of concerns for the park in 2019. This group spent many hours cleaning and maintaining the park. Rum Island park was essentially neglected for decades by Columbia County's leaders and was considered "...a thorn in our side." Your historian told them they should consider Rum Island Spring their "crown jewel." Then when they got money for renovation they failed to hold a promised meeting where the public could have input. Photo by Jim Tatum.

Thanks to Stew Lilker for this re-post from the Columbia County

Observer for the latest about the controversy over Rum Island Park. Thursday, July 16, will be the regular commissioners' meeting at 5:30 in Lake City where decisions may be made.

Work on the park has been inexcusably slow, in early September it will have been closed for a year.

Read the original article [here at the Columbia County Observer](#).

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

jim.tatum@oursantaferiver.org

*– A river is like a life: once taken,
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*

Columbia County's Rum Island Park Rules & Fees on Center Stage in Fort White

Posted July 10, 2020 10:45 am | [12 Comments](#)
The spring area at Rum Island Park under reconstruction in March 2020.

By Steve Litterer

COLUMBIA COUNTY, FL -- Following up on its March 3, 2020 workshop, the Columbia County 5 met in Fort White last night to hash out the proposed rules for Rum Island Park which lies on the Santa Fe River in the south end of Columbia County.



The \$300,000 Rum Island Bathroom, courtesy of Florida's taxpayers.

After spending almost \$300,000 on a bathroom and other renovations to Rum Island Park, Columbia County decided it needed rules to protect the taxpayer funded investment. In a meeting in the south end of the County residents came and were heard regarding the proposed rules written by County Attorney Joel Foreman with some help from County Staff members.

A Columbia County Trick Notifying Workshops as Special Meetings

How about the resolution:

[Columbia County's Rum Island Park: Politicians Are Doing Attention](#)

[March 3, 2020](#)

[Rum Island to Remain Open: Can Ford Not Change of Heart](#)

[April 3, 2019](#)

The meeting, which should have been noticed as a workshop, was noticed as a special meeting.

Over the past few years, this little trick by the County to notice special meetings, which allow action by the Commissioners, (workshops don't allow action), have mainly taken the place of workshops and is used to keep the public guessing, off balance and wondering, "What are they going to do this time?"



County Attorney Joel Foreman

County Attorney Joel Foreman, who was the first one to speak, gave the public his take on the meeting purpose: "A document [the resolution on the evening's agenda] was worked up in a meeting between myself, Mr. Pitman, Mr. Scott, and I believe Mr. Kirby. I believe it has been noticed as a special meeting. This is essentially a workshop. This resolution is not up for adoption. That would happen next Thursday. This should be treated as a rough draft."

No one from the County staff offered to explain why the meeting was not noticed as a workshop. None of the County 5 asked, which is their normal MO.



Commissioner Ronald Williams

Commissioner Williams pointed out that everyone didn't have a copy of the resolution. He asked Mr. Foreman to read it. The meeting material provided by the County was a three page agenda which was mostly an abridged version of the County meeting rules. The resolution on tap for the evening would have taken up the same amount of paper. Chairman Witt gave his copy of the resolution to a member of the public, who had asked where one could find the resolution. That was the only copy of the resolution available for distribution.

The Public Inquires



David Levin

David Levin was not happy about the lack of the resolution. He said, "I probably don't use half the stuff I pay taxes for. Go back to the drawing board please. (Said he didn't have a copy of the proposed rules and regulations) If I had it I would make ten copies and give them to ten friends. These are arbitrary fees - arbitrary numbers. I don't know where they come from." If Mr. Levin had found the information on the County website, he would have discovered that there was no supporting information which demonstrated anything at all regarding how the County came up with its user fees, or anything else. Many times, this is standard operating procedure in Columbia County.



Steve Lewis

Resident Steve Lewis was also not happy about being charged a user fee to use the County Park, "In the 25 years I've been here I've paid almost \$25,000 in property taxes. I don't want to pay to go to a park. Take it off my taxes. I'm already paying for that." Mr. Lewis said Rum Island Park has been closed for almost a year "because somebody didn't do the planning right."

Mr. Lewis continued, "I'm not going to pay \$5 to go into the free park that I moved to Columbia County for. You really need to think about that. If I go down there with my tax certificate, I expect to get into there for free." Gerald Gordon is a community volunteer who works with veterans and presently has a fishing program. "These are hospitalized veterans and this is the only way they get out. I want to know what kind of fees we're going to have."



Ted Stone

Ted Stone addressed the County 5: "My name is Ted Stone. I'm a resident. I'm also a fisherman. The fish bite best at dawn and dusk. Opening the park at 8 am and closing it at 7:30 pm doesn't work for fishing... I believe that parks should be paid for out of permits, rather than out of taxes, but \$5 a use is excessive. Mr. Stone recommended that there be a \$25 yearly permit and the fees not begin until the New Year. If the County Manager would have provided a few copies of the four page resolution at the meeting, Mr. Stone would have read that a yearly permit fee of \$25 dollars was proposed.

"The Early Bird Gets the Worm"



Linda Curtis

Linda Curtis explained she and her daughter use the park for fishing. "The early bird gets the worm," she said. Ms. Curtis continued, "I can't afford to pay \$5 dollars a trip, never mind \$25 a year to have a permit. I don't believe this is fair. It takes me all I can in gas just to get to Rum Island. I don't have \$25 dollars to pay for a pass to get into a place that we help clean. We clean up that park. It's people like me that watch over this park." Ms. Curtis is part of an ad hoc civic group, Friends of Rum Island, which volunteers to keep Rum Island Park clean.



Merrilee

Merrilee Malwitz Jipson, environmentalist, business owner (Rum 138), and outfitter addressed the County 5, "You talk about a standard Parks and Recreation Vendor Application. That doesn't exist. I called the Parks Department; they said they don't have one." Ms. Malwitz Jipson looked for clarification of the word "vendor" in the resolution and explained that folks like her that bring people to the park to use kayaks provide a "livery" service. Ms. Malwitz Jipson also wanted to know how the County came up with its fee schedule. She asked, "How are the fees created?" The highest fee in Marion County for a livery is \$600. She continued, "As far as closing the boat ramp, I know why you are doing that. You have a \$300,000 bathroom to protect" and added, "You should have that park open 24 hours a day." Mr. Malwitz Jipson closed her remarks asking the 5, "I want to know where you got that \$1000 fee"



Victor Paulis

Mr. Victor Paulis asked when the park was going to open. Nobody knows. Mr. Paulis said, "I think \$5 per vehicle - I really don't want to pay \$5. I can see the \$25 yearly fee. The annual fee for non residents is out of line as the yearly fee for all Florida State Parks is \$60 a year. I don't think that's right... Compared to the state park, I just don't think the value is there."

Commissioner Ford and the Others Weigh In



Commissioner Rocky Ford

Commissioner Rocky Ford is the Commissioner who is behind the Rum Island Project. Chairman Witt recommended that there be a \$25 yearly permit and the fees not begin until the New Year. Your Reporter asked about discounts for veterans and the fees for walk-ins or those on bicycles. Commissioner Ford said, "The reason we put fees on the cars is that you are basically buying a parking spot." County Attorney Foreman explained that proof of payment is displayed in the windshield or dashboard and if one walks in or rides a bicycle in they have no windshield. Commissioner Ford asked about discounts for seniors and veterans.

Commissioner Ford and the Others Weigh In



Commissioner Bucky Nash

Chairman Witt gave everyone the chance to be heard. Chairman Witt recommended that the "Friends of Rum Island Park" the people that clean the park, could apply for a free pass and he said he would like to have that added to the resolution. Commissioner Nash agreed and added that he thought the hours should be changed to accommodate fishing, but "the park should not be open 24 hours a day." Commissioner Ronald Williams said that if a person lived in the park vacation would cease. "We're not trying" to shut nobody out." He agreed that the hours of the park should be changed to accommodate the fishermen.



Commissioner Tim Murphy

Commissioner Tim Murphy said he supported the \$5 dollar daily fee and the \$25 annual fee. "The park should not be open 24 hrs a day. I'm going to support regulation on it." Chairman Witt was in line with all the other commissioners. However, he wanted the commercial fees to be researched. Your Reporter asked about discounts for veterans and the fees for walk-ins or those on bicycles. Commissioner Ford said, "The reason we put fees on the cars is that you are basically buying a parking spot." County Attorney Foreman explained that proof of payment is displayed in the windshield or dashboard and if one walks in or rides a bicycle in they have no windshield. Commissioner Ford asked about discounts for seniors and veterans.



Commissioner Bucky Nash

Commissioner Nash spoke up for veterans and seniors. Commissioner Nash recommended "Seniors and veterans are free." Everyone agreed that was a good idea. Mr. Foreman will draw up a new resolution incorporating the agreed upon changes. As the meeting was drawing to a close, Commissioner Ford said he hoped the park would be opening at the beginning of August.

Comments [\(to add a comment go here\)](#)

On July 18, 2020, Jose Martinez of Columbia County wrote:
Sad

On July 18, 2020, Theodore Stone of Columbia County wrote:

First, I had a copy of the meeting agenda. This was available through the county website prior to the meeting. I was able to obtain a copy on Monday, July 6. Second, my complaint was that there was to be a \$5 per vehicle fee charged, presumably concurrent with the reopening of the park, and that there was to be a \$55 annual permit for county residents beginning in 2021. This meant that I would have to pay the full fee for each visit from the reopening of the park until January 2021. Since I am hoping for the park to reopen soon, and as I have been a frequent visitor, I would have to pay an inordinate amount of money, far exceeding \$25, to use the park this year (2020). I asked that a permit for 2020 be made available. I also asked that the park be open from 1 hour before sunrise until 1 hour after sunset, to allow for activities such as fishing, bird watching and simple contemplation.
Ted Stone, Columbia County resident and property tax payer since 2004.

On July 10, 2020, Troy Langford of Columbia County wrote:

My mother and father met at run island and I grew up there. I pay my taxes and it's the only free spring in the county. If you all decide to charge us \$5 a car I will get a waiver signed and we will protest for what we want. For that park to be free to the people. You want to take are taxes to build a septic that will flood every year.

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