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Commissioners deny permit for pirate festival

ALBANY — The lack of more than one road to allow guests to safely enter and leave a proposed pirate festival in a field on Allen Lane led the Linn County Board of Commissioners to deny an outdoor assembly permit for the Pacific Northwest Pirate Nation festival in June, during their Tuesday morning meeting.

Commissioners Roger Nyquist, Sherrie Sprenger and Will Tucker were unanimous and decisive in their decision.

The public hearing lasted 2½ hours.

But it was an aerial photograph showing the site during a similar event last year — at which there were 1,500 guests — spurred Commissioner Sprenger to say she “would not be able to sleep tonight” had she supported the permit application.

She also pointed out that if a fire started, guests would be rushing to escape, while emergency services teams would be rushing to get in, all on one small road.

Her fellow commissioners were adamant that approving the permit would not be in the best “health and safety” interests of guests, as well as nearby landowners. The property is zoned Exclusive Farm Use and is bordered by grass seed fields and orchards.

Festival site owner Brooke Knutzen told the commissioners:

- The event hires three water tenders to be on-site.
- There is trained security team of staff and volunteers that monitor the site 24/7.
- This year’s capacity would be capped at 1,200 registered guests, or 400 vehicles.
- There would be a trained medical crew on site.
- Anyone causing problems would be banned.
- All tickets are pre-paid, no ticket sales at the gate.
- Children are welcome.

- Campfires are not allowed. Guests with cooking stoves must have two fire extinguishing systems with them.
- Only battery-powered lanterns are allowed.
- Smoking is allowed only in designated area.
- There are no electronically amplified sound systems.

But neighbors said they are extremely concerned about the potential damage that could occur to their farms and homes, during what is a very dry time of year in the mid-valley.

Neighbor Forrest Reid said the closest fire hydrant is a mile from the event site and the road leading into it is narrow. Fire trucks and ambulances can access the site, but slowly.

Reid said he mows his pasture near the site every summer, but does not bale the cut grass, so there is dry fuel on the ground. Another neighbor said he does not mow his field and that leaves dead standing fuel.

“It is tinder dry that time of year,” Reid said.

A well-known mid-valley attorney, Reid said he was also concerned about allowing a permit to someone who held an event last year, without acquiring a permit, choosing to pay a fine instead.

Neighbor Dennis Kites said he was disturbed by loud “booms” at night, but others said the noise level was not of great concern.

Kites said a long line of vehicles, made it difficult for his family to access their home.

Grass seed farmer and hazel nut grower Stan Boshart said he is “always worried about starting a fire with our combines or swathers. It’s a huge concern.”

That is one reason he is so concerned about people holding festivals on property zoned Exclusive Farm Use.

Neighbor Robert Simmons said he has more than 500 trees — many of them old-growth oaks — on his property which abuts the proposed festival site.

He said the population of Tangent is about 1,200 people. Simmons said what the event organizers were asking is putting the entire population of the community on a portion of 40 acres — with only one road for access.

“This isn’t the county fairground,” Simmons said. “They should use other venues. Why here?”

Simmons said he had a couple trespassers on his property last year and some of the guests went to the Calapooia River to recreate. Alcohol is allowed at campsites, so Simmons said, playing in the river after consuming alcohol could present safety issues.

Linn County Sheriff Michelle Duncan said she is concerned about guests being allowed to bring and consume alcohol at their campsites.

“You lose the ability to control it,” Sheriff Duncan said.

She is also concerned about how 1,200 people could be evacuated efficiently in the event of an emergency.

Board Chairman Nyquist said he knows the Allen Lane area well.

“We were concerned about the possibility of adding a dozen homes out there a few years ago,” Nyquist said. “I have a problem approving this. It is not the right location to put 1,200 people and 400 cars. There is a definite lack of infrastructure here.”

Commissioner Tucker said the Willamette Country Music festival that used to be held in a farm field east of Brownsville, had much more room (and more people) that this proposed event, but still had access issues.