

Riches still in running to operate Fallen Leaf Lake



John Rich, right, at Sunday's Fallen Leaf Lake board meeting.

Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

FALLEN LEAF LAKE â€” Resolving the Fallen Leaf Lake marina operator issue has turned out to be more difficult than negotiating the areaâ€™s narrow, windy road on a warm summer day.

Facing an unfavorable voter referendum, the small townâ€™s Community Services District board wrapped up another oppositional, but more civil, meeting Sunday at the firehouse by repealing its earlier decisions to take over the marina and general store if a contract could not be met with John and Ruth Rich. The couple has run the village center for 14 years under the auspices of Fallen Leaf Landing.

But the latest in the ongoing saga that has included threats, shouting matches, accusations and now an impasse in this quiet

mountain haven at the base of the Desolation Wilderness, doesn't necessarily mean the Rich family will manage the dual operation when the road is plowed in the spring.

When asked if the door has been left open, John Rich replied as the two-dozen people disbursed: "Well, it's not shut."

"We're more hopeful with the new board," Ruth Rich added.

The Riches and the CSD board have fought over terms of a contract since April, when on the 25th the board expressed interest in taking over the revenue-generating enterprise. Board members want more accountability, changes in practices and rent "at least \$23,000 more than the \$90,000 it receives from the operator. The Rich family wants to keep the job.

Some heavy-handed support from the community is behind the Riches.

Fallen Leaf Lake citizen Betsy Wheeler stood Sunday wielding a certified petition of 419 names prepared to nullify the board's actions of its April 25 and Sept. 5 meetings and offer support of the Rich family maintaining control at the ballot box. No election date has been set.

"We will defend before a judge the validity of this referendum. What else can we do but move forward with the democratic process?" Wheeler asked.

But not everyone sees the issue the same way.

Fallen Leaf resident Steve Tallman stood up and said he felt like "the board is being bullied" and criticized how the marina has been run.

Board President Dana Clark launched the agenda item by saying Fallen Leaf Lake's attorney found the referendum

“inappropriate.” But later in the meeting he discounted the attorney’s opinion and said there is an advantage to pulling back from a full-scale assault for the district to run the operation to keep it out of a legal battle.

The board’s decision to repeal its earlier votes essentially takes the referendum off the table.

Time may be on everyone’s side in the long run. A new board will be elected Dec. 4.

“What I can’t understand is why do you expect perfection from your side of the contract?” Jennifer Thornton, who’s running for a board seat, asked the board.

Plus, the winter may give the board a chance to reevaluate and revise an earlier contract with Rich that he signed but board member Eric Thaden calls “unacceptable” and “irresponsible for the board to adopt.”

To be continued.

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