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# Ocean Ridge: Artificial turf restrictions approved

Posted by [The Coastal Star](#) on March 4, 2020 at 11:30

**By Dan Moffett**

Don MaGruder's last night as an Ocean Ridge commissioner appears likely to have a lasting impact on the town's future. Or anyway, an impact on its lawns. MaGruder cast the final and deciding vote that approved by a 3-2 margin an ordinance restricting the use of artificial turf — ending, at least for the moment, months of divisive debate that often pitted neighbor against neighbor. "It's not perfect, but it can be modified later on," MaGruder said during the meeting on March 2. "We need to put it on the books now so we have some protection."

The vice mayor argued that the town had to move expeditiously to get an artificial turf provision in its code, or risk giving state lawmakers an opening to dictate their own version of turf restrictions to the town.

MaGruder, who announced in November he was moving to North Carolina after more than three decades in Ocean Ridge, was joined in approving the second reading by Commissioners Kristine de Haseth and Susan Hurlburt. They said the ordinance puts the town in line with regulations in other communities and aligns with the recommendations of leading environmental scientists.

Mayor Steve Coz and Commissioner Phil Besler voted no. They argued the science was inconclusive and the commission was overreaching into residents' property rights.

“If we pass this, what’s next?” Coz had asked, saying decisions about lawn materials should be left to the homeowner.

Unlike neighboring communities such as Lantana and Manalapan that have restricted synthetic grass with scarcely a public complaint or comment, Ocean Ridge has been tormented by the issue for much of the last year.

The town’s Planning and Zoning Commission wrestled with it for months, consulting other municipalities and officials, before recommending code changes. The Town Commission devoted four consecutive meetings to reviewing the new restrictions, including a joint session with P&Z in February. Dozens of residents supporting plastic grass came forward during meetings and bombarded commissioners with petitions, fliers, emails and texts.

One resident called on MaGruder to recuse himself before the final vote because he was leaving town. Town Attorney Brian Shutt dismissed the idea, saying recusals are for financial conflicts of interest, personal gain or loss.

“To my knowledge, you don’t own a turf company,” Shutt said to MaGruder. Supporters of synthetic turf made the case it was good for the environment because it needs no watering, fertilizers, pesticides or cutting with loud, pollutant-spewing mowers.

Hurlburt, however, countered by consulting with Marco Schiavon, a leading expert on turfgrass science at the University of Florida. Schiavon and other experts told her that UF does not consider artificial turf “Florida friendly” or environmentally acceptable. The experts said it holds in heat and raises the temperature of neighborhoods; it allows microscopic petroleum pollutants to seep into the soil and water table; it kills the beneficial bacteria and microorganisms underneath; it collects animal feces; and it is an awful substitute for conscientious natural xeriscaping.

MaGruder said the ordinance doesn’t impose an absolute ban, but rather a reasonable, measured limit on homeowners that protects the character of Ocean Ridge. While the new rule prohibits artificial turf use in front yards, it allows some use in backyards, side yards and pool areas.

“What we’ve done is a good compromise,” Hurlburt said.

**In other business**, during their meeting on Feb. 3, commissioners approved raising Town Manager Tracey Stevens’ pay from \$102,500 to \$125,000. The vote, based on a salary survey of other municipalities, was 4-1 with Besler dissenting. He said that while he joined other commissioners in praising Stevens, her raises should be more incremental.