

Turtle Group May Get To Resume Patrols

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COCOA BEACH — City officials tentatively agreed Tuesday to let the Brevard Sea Turtle Preservation Society resume using all-terrain vehicles for its nighttime beach patrols.

City Manager Jim Smith stopped the society from using its ATVs on Cocoa Beach last month after it reported Gannett Co. Chairman Allen Neuharth for bright lights at his Pumpkin Center estate. The city later said Neuharth's lights complied with the lighting ordinance.

The ordinance prohibits direct beachfront lighting during turtle-nesting season from May to October because bright lights distract nesting females and hatchlings.

But city council members overturned Smith's decision Tuesday night by 3 to 2 at a workshop. They agreed to let the society patrol the beaches for illegal beachfront lighting, turtle poachers and stranded hatchlings.

Council members are expected to formally approve the action at their meeting Thursday night.

"This is a service, a free service, to you," society president Peter Bandre told city officials, "because you have a serious lighting problem. We don't want to battle with you. We want to help you enforce your lighting ordinance."

The city's decision will let society volunteers ride ATVs on the beach from 11 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. daily during turtle-nesting season from May 1 to Oct. 31. Volunteers must report beachfront lighting violations to city police. If they knock on residents' doors about lights, the city manager can ban their ATVs from the beach.

The 200-member society, which has its headquarters in Melbourne Beach, patrols beaches nightly from Sebastian Inlet to Cape Canaveral, searching for turtle poachers and for bright lights that can disturb nesting females and baby hatchlings. It also treats injured turtles and helps enforce conservation laws.

Since Smith's decision, the society has not patrolled Cocoa Beach, saying the city's 6-mile stretch of beach is too long for them to walk each night. Members plan to resume their patrols this weekend.

Although the society claimed Pumpkin Center's lights would distract turtles, Neuharth and city officials said the lights were designed to comply with the city ordinance.

Society volunteers and a police officer woke up Neuharth about midnight May 29 to complain about the lights. The next day, Neuharth wrote to the mayor, comparing the treatment to that in communist countries. He also threatened to sue the city if it happened again.

The society's complaint and Neuharth's letter received nationwide publicity, including an article in the Wall Street Journal.

Mayor Lawton and council member Arvid Dahlquist, the two who voted against the society's ATVs return to the beach, chastised the society for the Neuharth incident and for promoting publicity about the run-in.

"I'm angry and I would like to punish you," Lawton told about 25 society volunteers and supporters at the meeting. "I'm not sure if you're here for the turtles or on an ego trip for publicity about your society."