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Bennett offered county attorney's job

By SUZETTE PORTER

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CLEARWATER – The Board of County Commissioners unanimously agreed on March 11 to give the interim county attorney a more permanent job title.

Commissioners Ronnie Duncan and Calvin Harris were absent.

Jim Bennett has served as interim Pinellas County Attorney since September 2007.

He was appointed when former county attorney Susan Churuti was fired after a Pinellas County grand jury questioned some of her actions in a land deal between the county and Property Appraiser Jim Smith.



Jim Bennett

A recent job search turned up 12 applicants, and the board concluded that of those interested, Bennett was the best man for the job.

Commissioner Susan Latvala made the motion that negotiations begin to make Bennett the official county attorney. Commissioner Karen Seel seconded the motion.

"I'm glad we went through the process, but Jim stood out in the group," Commissioner Ken Welch said.

Bennett was chief assistant county attorney from 1994 to 2007 and assistant county attorney from 1987 to 1994.

When appointed to the interim position, Bennett was given a pay raise to \$196,000, which was the same as Churuti was paid.

Search continues for county administrator

The board also unanimously approved staff's recommendation of the firm, Waters Consulting Group, from Dallas, Texas, to conduct the search for a new county administrator.

Former county administrator Steve Spratt resigned in the aftermath of the grand jury's investigation of a land deal between Smith and the county. Spratt ended his six years on the job on Sept. 30, 2007

After a seven-year hiatus, Fred Marquis agreed on Sept. 25 to return to his old job and serve as interim Pinellas County administrator until a replacement could be found.

Despite repeated hints from the board that Marquis remain on a more permanent basis, Marquis has not shown any signs of swaying from his original intent of serving only for a short term.

The plan calls for candidates to be interviewed during the summer and a new county administrator to begin work on Nov. 17.

In other business, the board

- Heard a report from external auditors Ernst and Young who gave the county an "unqualified or clean" audit with only one material weakness noted. The weakness involved a mistake made years ago when a depreciable item was given a time range of 200 years instead of 20. New policies and procedures are being developed to provide more scrutiny of depreciation assets, according to Clerk of the Court Ken Burke.

- Agreed to advertise a public hearing on a proposed amendment to the county's Human Right's Ordinance to give protection to people regardless of sexual orientation. The hearing will be on the agenda on April 22.

- Approved a request for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to buy reclaimed water for irrigation of the national cemetery. The V.A. will pay the cost of \$650,000 for construction of the water line. The reclaimed water will be sold on a "when available" basis.

- Heard a report from Assistant County Administrator Elithia Stanfield on first week of the 60-day legislative session in Tallahassee. Stanfield said the big focus thus far had been the state budget and what to do about the \$2 billion to \$3 billion shortfall.

She said talk had included additional property tax reform and action on the highest and best use and a possible tax cap.

Other issues on the forefront at the state include water wars, growth management, affordable housing and others.

Among the many items being discussed that Stanfield said "made her very nervous," included a proposal to eliminate the 1 percent payment made to counties to process forms associated with property sales and a plan to expand the time frame that violent juvenile offenders could be held before trial.

One proposal would take away money from local governments and the others would increase costs.

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