

Alternate view of Sarasota Medieval Fair as agritourism

I read with some alarm the letter from Jeremy Croteau in the Thursday October 21 East County Observer, in which he makes statements that in my opinion, and backed by strong evidence provided to various Manatee County authorities, FDOT, and SWFWMD, are misleading at best and patently false at worst.

I met Jeremy when he first began clearing his 47 acres directly adjacent to Saddlebag Creek Ranches, which is located off a very narrow stretch of SR70 ~5 miles West of Myakka City. Extensive land clearing and multiple loads of fill were being spread across what quickly became a “sand desert” with no “meadows of lush grass”, no livestock, and a bare number of perimeter plantings and a small section of potted palms. He stated he was restarting a former nursery and would graze cattle. I liked that idea as a nursery/cattle grazing operation would be vastly preferred to a housing development, particularly off that narrow stretch of SR70 fronting his property.

Later in the conversation, Jeremy admitted he planned to host an annual Medieval Fair along with weddings and other events throughout the year.

I won't go into details of all the associated press surrounding his mother, Manatee County building department turnover, Manatee County Inspector General investigations, or recent attempts to bypass what should be a required special event permit associated with an entertainment venue, by claiming agritourism exemption via what is clearly not, nor ultimately intended to be (?), a viable agricultural operation. Never mind the fact that only ~7 acres of the 47 are currently zoned ag. Note – a claimed agritourism exemption from a special event permit could avoid what would surely be major concerns raised regarding “off-site impacts”, which are specifically reviewed during special permit hearings. Very high odds the permit would then be denied which would effectively halt the fair.

My and my neighbors' concerns are simple – traffic and security (off-site impacts). SR70 is not CR675 where Hunsader Farm host their annual pumpkin fest on a lightly traveled county road, which saw massive traffic jams last weekend extending all the way to and along SR64 & SR70. SR70 fronting Jeremy's property is one of the narrowest stretches of state road in Florida with deep swales and guardrails only a few feet from the edges of the two-lane highway. There are no turning lanes, nor room for emergency vehicles to pass vehicles stuck in traffic. The guard rails prevent that. Fair attendance estimates, based on prior years when held in Sarasota County, are >6,000 people/day. Traffic on SR70 will be stalled for miles with who knows how many accidents, hindered cross-state commercial traffic, upset county residents, road rage, etc. The Medieval Fair is a wonderful family-oriented event but a worst location could not have been chosen.

From a security perspective, our adjacent homeowners are worried about possible threats to their families and properties as there is no appreciable fencing between our properties & Jeremy's. Jeremy's parking area directly abuts numerous Saddlebag Creek homeowners.

In my opinion, and others with whom I have spoken, Jeremy's claim of, and attempts to paint a picture of a “farm”, are nothing more than a ruse to bypass the rules governing commercial entertainment venues, no matter how “family-friendly” they may be.

Jack Duich Saddlebag Creek Ranches

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