

Cape Coral Mayor, CEO of LCEC spar



FRANK BUMB, FBUMB@NEWS-PRESS.COM 5:35 p.m. EDT September 9, 2015



(Photo: Special to new-press.com)

Cape Coral Mayor Marni Sawicki couldn't bear to be in the same room as Lee County Electric Cooperative CEO Dennie Hamilton for an entire luncheon. What that means for the city's negotiations with the electric provider on a possible new 30-year franchise agreement or the city becoming its own electric provider depends on who you ask.

Hamilton spoke at the Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce luncheon about the ongoing negotiations between the city and LCEC for a new franchise agreement and the city's exploration of purchasing LCEC's assets and running a municipal electric utility.

During his speech, Hamilton specifically decried Cape Coral City Council members' unwillingness to meet with him one-on-one without any city attorneys present.



Hamilton (Photo: Special to news-press.com)

Afterward, he opened the floor to questions and Sawicki rose to correct what she called inaccuracies.

"I'm disappointed in what you're doing because you just misinformed quite a bit of people," Sawicki said. "This is why we have the lawyers involved because if you want to negotiate this is not how to do it."

After Sawicki finished, Hamilton said the city had cancelled two meetings between the franchise agreement negotiating teams. At that point, Sawicki became agitated, threw her head back said, "Oh my God," and began to leave the lunch.

Hamilton continued, saying he didn't want to offend anyone.

"You're not offending me, but you're not accurate with what you're saying," Sawicki said and left the luncheon.

Sawicki said in a phone interview after the meeting she felt Hamilton's demeanor and statements forced her to leave.

"I would hope that he would not be, I'm trying to use a word other than snide, when he's discussing these matters," Sawicki said. "It was misinformation meant to put us in a poor light."

Sawicki said she has concerns about Hamilton going to public events and discussing the franchise agreement negotiations and information gathering process on a potential municipal electric utility.

"It is a public roadshow to force us into, like the good ole boy system, to force us into a deal that is not necessarily in the best interests of the city," Sawicki said. "That's what I'm really worried about. That (Hamilton) going to every luncheon, Rotary Club meeting is meant to force us through political pressure to sign on the dotted line on an agreement exactly how they want it and that I will not do."

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Sawicki said the city is still in the information gathering stage on the possible municipal electric utility and any franchise agreement with LCEC. Sawicki said LCEC is not providing adequate information on equity with LCEC by city residents and provided a "cookie-cutter" franchise agreement in March.

"All we're doing is gathering information so that we can make an informed decision on our contract," Sawicki said.

After the meeting, Hamilton said through LCEC spokeswoman Karen Ryan that the electric provider did not want and is not trying to make the negotiations contentious.

"Hopefully it's not going to impact the negotiations," Ryan said. "I think you can see by the mayor's reaction they may not feel the same way."

What is being negotiated?

The current franchise agreement between the city of Cape Coral and LCEC is set to expire on Sept. 30, 2016. A franchise agreement allows a utility provider access to a municipality, county or other government's right-of-way. In return, some franchise agreements include a franchise fee. The franchise fee for the city of Cape Coral brings in about \$6 million.

With the agreement set to expire, Cape Coral City Council decided to also explore purchasing LCEC's assets in the city and become its own electric provider (a municipal electric utility) to its residents. Any city purchase of LCEC assets or franchise agreement is separate from one another. However, numerous officials have said any city purchase of LCEC assets could be leverage for the franchise agreement.

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