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Hillsborough considers allowing beekeeping in neighborhoods

By Mike Salinero



It was sweltering outside as Joyce Lang and Miles Carter pulled on head-to-toe jump suits and drove out to an orange grove to play with bees.

As Carter puts it, he and Lang are "serious sideliners" when it comes to beekeeping. They enjoy "working the hives," even while wearing stifling protective gear. They sell the honey the bees produce, but Lang said they are just as interested in the positive effects their bees have on the environment.

"If we don't have honey bees, to have them here pollinating our fruits and vegetables, we'd only get fruit from China or Chile and the prices would go up, Lang said.

Lang, Carter and other locals who practice the apiary arts have asked Hillsborough County commissioners to change land-use rules to allow beekeeping in residential neighborhoods. Commissioners will hold a workshop on the rule change Tuesday at 1:30 p.m. Public hearings on the issue will follow later in the year.

Beehives, like organic gardens and chicken coops, are popping up in more and more urban and suburban backyards.

The state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which registers and inspects apiaries, says the number of beekeepers in Florida has grown from about 600 five years ago to 2,100 now. They produce a combined 17 million pounds of honey each year.

"This idea of urban beekeeping is not unique to Hillsborough County," said Tom Hiznay, a senior planner with the county's Development Services Department. "It's a growing trend, part of the urban agriculture movement across the country."

If commissioners approve the rule changes, homes on quarter-acre lots or smaller will be able to have two bee hives; larger properties could have more. A healthy hive can have as many 60,000 bees, Lang said.

Hiznay said his office sent the proposed rule changes to the county's numerous neighborhood associations. So far, there have been no signs of opposition, he said.

That could change, however, after more details filter out to the public. There have already been a couple of dust-ups between beekeepers and their neighbors in the county.

Mark Bentley, a Tampa attorney, represented a Brandon resident who lived near a large beekeeping operation. His client said she couldn't use her pool because hundreds of bees from the apiary were drawn to the water.

Bentley tried to get the county to declare beekeeping an "animal production unit," which has more strenuous regulations and larger setbacks from residential areas than general agriculture. Bentley failed to get the designation changed, but he said the experience led him to believe beekeeping doesn't fit in residential areas.

"It's fundamental that these bees go the nearest water source and they are attracted to chlorine water," Bentley said. "That would be a major concern to me as a parent."

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But experts say people who live next door to a beekeeper are no more likely to be stung than anyone else.

"Our managed bees have been managed for a couple of thousand years," said Jerry Hayes, chief of the state agriculture department's apiary section. "We've bred most of their defensive and aggressive characteristics out of them."

Plus, Hayes said the presence of managed bees in an area reduces the chance their "grumpy cousins," Africanized honeybees, will move in. The Africanized bees, which come to this area through the Port of Tampa, have to compete with managed bees for the same resources. Hayes said the two strands end up interbreeding, resulting in milder-tempered offspring.

Carter said managed bees are mostly docile and too busy collecting nectar and pollen to sting humans. The exception is when their hives are perceived to be under attack, hence the stories of tree trimmers who accidentally slice a hive and are chased for blocks by angry bees.

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It is true beekeepers wear protective gear when working their hives, but that's a precaution because bees are defensive about their home.

Beekeepers don't go near their hives without a smoker, a metal device that looks like the Tin Man's hat. The smoker is filled with straw and lit. The smoke pumped out the spout interferes with guard bees' pheromones -- chemical scents that alert the other bees an intruder is in their midst.

Lang and Carter recently demonstrated for a reporter how they take apart the hives -- three stacked wooden boxes -- and pull out the wood frames covered with bees making honey and beeswax. The affinity between Lang and the bees is so strong her protective garb seems superfluous.

"See how nice and gentle they are," she says, smiling from behind her screened mask. "They're not hurting anybody. They're my little honeys."

Area residents who would like help getting started in beekeeping can contact the Tampa Bay Beekeepers Association at www.tampabaybeekeepers.com, or go to the agriculture department's Website at <http://www.freshfromflorida.com/>.

Be forewarned: Beekeeping can be expensive. It takes a minimum of \$1,000 to get started, the main expense being a honey extractor at \$900.

But the rewards, Lang said, are worth the money. In addition to the benefits to flower and vegetable gardens, the honey that bees produce is a healthy and delicious food that can be used in dozens of recipes. Proponents tout it as a cure or palliative for allergies, arthritis and other ailments.

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