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# County fortifies vacation rental enforcement

May 23, 2017 by Sara Matthis (<http://keyswweekly.com/42/author/sara-matthis/>)

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To handle the growing number of vacation rental law violators, Monroe County “rented” a software license for one year. At a cost of \$97,238, Host Compliance will help the county identify vacation rentals advertised online and provide the evidence needed to prosecute. Founder and CEO Ulrik Binzer said he experienced the need for this data first-hand, after serving on a planning board attempting to address a similar problem in Tiburon, California.

“In true Silicon Valley tradition, I decided to build it. I’ve teamed up with some smart engineers and data scientists,” he said.

Binzer said that in a test, the software found about 2,500 violators in unincorporated Monroe County. That’s a “true number” that takes into account homes listed on more than one website. He said the software can also pinpoint how long visitors stayed, a key point in Monroe County vacation rental law.

“Well, most of those sites have calendars, and those can be cross-referenced with other data points,” he said.

Binzer said the program specific to Monroe County should be live in less than a month.

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One, file a notice with a state agency to report real estate agents who represent vacation rental law scofflaws. Two, purchase software to identify and prosecute scofflaws. Three, hire two staffers to handle the

job.

That's the action the Monroe County Board of County Commissioners took Wednesday at its monthly meeting in Key West. Not without some back-and-forth among commissioners, though, about cost and labor.

All the commissioners were in agreement that real estate agents who have represented property owners found guilty of violating vacation rental law should have their names forwarded to the state Department of Business and Professional Regulation.

According to Assistant County Administrator Christine Hurley, the county has already scheduled meetings with Realtor associations to let them know of the coming change.

In the second move, the county agreed to spend \$97,238 for one year of software to help identify illegal vacation rentals. Commissioner Danny Kolhage questioned the cost.

"You sit one person down in front of a computer and you can find all the illegal vacation rental advertisements that you want," he said.

Hurley said this particular software, Host Compliance, not only uses government data that outlines the specific regions to search, but also provides details needed for prosecution. A test search revealed more than 2,500 possible violators, she said. Many online listings don't provide an actual address until money has changed hands, nor do they provide information about how long a visitor stayed.

"I do recognize this is a big expense. But, conservatively, we could recoup \$770,000 in fines from violators in one year," she said, adding that staff sat through more than one presentation with the vendor and interviewed other vendors.

"Knowing about an illegal vacation rental and proving it in front of a special magistrate are two separate things," said Commissioner David Rice.

Host Compliance lists about 60 city and county clients on its website ranging from nearby City of Fort Lauderdale to Napa, California.

Kolhage was the lone dissenter on the decision to purchase the software. "Not because I don't want to prosecute illegal transient rentals, because I do. But this should have been bid; it's too costly and that's why I don't support it."

The final part of the plan was to hire two new full-time staffers to keep up with the workload the county anticipates will be generated by the software. With benefits, the two positions would cost the county \$140,000.

At the moment, the county employs one staffer tasked with this duty. Hurley said she was only able to tackle 93 cases. Commissioner Heather Carruthers questioned why they shouldn't be contract employees, or why the county shouldn't only hire one additional employee.

Kolhage and Carruthers dissented and the measure passed.

"For the record, only the Democrats were interested in saving money," said Carruthers, eliciting a laugh from the rest of the board and the public. The two are the only Democrats on the board.

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