WEST virginia legislature

2024 regular session

Enrolled

Senate Bill 171

By Senators Hamilton, Smith, Taylor, Oliverio, Deeds, Swope, Rucker, and Woodrum

[Passed February 13, 2024; in effect 90 days from passage]

AN ACT to amend and reenact §7-1-3 and §7-1-3ff of the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, all relating to prohibiting county commissions from adopting any ordinance, rule, license requirement, or other authorization that exceeds state law, rule, or regulation regarding agricultural operations; revoking any ordinance, rule, or regulation previously adopted by county commissions that exceeds state law, rule, or regulation regarding agricultural operations; prohibiting county commissions from adopting any ordinance, rule, regulation, or other authorization that prohibits or alters permissible use of federal or state pesticides, herbicides, or insecticides; prohibiting county commissions from adopting ordinances that regulate dwellings or other buildings on agricultural land or operations; and requiring appointment of at-large member on county enforcement agency to have background or knowledge of agricultural operations.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

ARTICLE 1. COUNTY COMMISSIONS GENERALLY.

§7-1-3. Jurisdiction, powers, and duties.

(a) The county commissions, through their clerks, shall have the custody of all deeds and other papers presented for record in their counties and the same shall be preserved therein, or otherwise disposed of as now is, or may be prescribed by law. They shall have jurisdiction in all matters of probate, the appointment and qualification of personal representatives, guardians, committees, curators and the settlement of their accounts and in all matters relating to apprentices. They shall also, under the rules as now are, or may be prescribed by law, have the superintendence and administration of the internal police and fiscal affairs of their counties, including the establishment and regulation of roads, ways, streets, avenues, drives and the like, and the naming or renaming thereof, in cooperation with local postal authorities, the Division of Highways and the directors of county emergency communications centers, to assure uniform, nonduplicative conversion of all rural routes to city-type addressing on a permanent basis, bridges, public landings, ferries and mills, with authority to lay and disburse the county levies. They shall, in all cases of contest, judge of the election, qualification and returns of their own members, and of all county and district officers, subject to appeal as prescribed by law. The tribunals as have been heretofore established by the Legislature under and by virtue of section thirty-four, article VIII of the Constitution of 1872, for police and fiscal purposes, shall, until otherwise provided by law, remain and continue as at present constituted in the counties in which they have been respectively established, and shall be and act as to police and fiscal matters in lieu of the county commission herein mentioned, until otherwise provided by law. And until otherwise provided by law, the clerk as is mentioned in section twenty-six of said article, as amended, shall exercise any powers and discharge any duties heretofore conferred on, or required of, any court or tribunal established for judicial purposes under said section, or the clerk of the court or tribunal, respectively, respecting the recording and preservation of deeds and other papers presented for record, matters of probate, the appointment and qualification of personal representatives, guardians, committees, curators and the settlement of their accounts and in all matters relating to apprentices. The county commission may not limit the right of any person to purchase, possess, transfer, own, carry, transport, sell or store any revolver, pistol, rifle or shotgun or any ammunition or ammunition components to be used therewith nor to so regulate the keeping of gunpowder so as to, directly or indirectly, prohibit the ownership of the ammunition: *Provided,* That no provision in this section may be construed to limit the authority of a county to restrict the commercial use of real estate in designated areas through planning or zoning ordinance.

(b) County commissions may not adopt or enact an ordinance, rule, license requirement, or other authorization that contravenes or is stricter than any state law, rule, or regulation relating to agricultural operations, as defined in §19-19-2 of this code. Any ordinance, rule, regulation, license requirement, or other authorization previously adopted by a county commission that contravenes or is stricter than any state law, rule, or regulation regarding agricultural operations is revoked.

(c) County commissions may not adopt an ordinance, rule, or regulation, or take other action, that prohibits the purchase, or alters the permissible use or application, of any federally or state-registered pesticide, herbicide, or insecticide product.

§7-1-3ff. Authority of county commission to regulate unsafe or unsanitary structures and refuse on private land; authority to establish an enforcement agency; county litter control officers; procedure for complaints; lien and sale of land to recover costs; entry on land to perform repairs and alterations or to satisfy lien; receipt of grants and subsidies.

(a) Plenary power and authority are hereby conferred upon every county commission to adopt ordinances regulating the repair, alteration, or improvement, or the vacating and closing or removal or demolition, or any combination thereof, of any dwellings or other buildings, except for buildings or dwellings on agricultural lands or operations as defined in §19-19-2 of this code, unfit for human habitation due to dilapidation, defects increasing the hazard of fire, accidents, or other calamities, lack of ventilation, light or sanitary facilities, or any other conditions prevailing in any dwelling or building, whether used for human habitation or not, which would cause the dwellings or other buildings to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous, or detrimental to the public safety or welfare, whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect.

(b) Plenary power and authority are hereby conferred upon every county commission to adopt ordinances regulating the removal and cleanup of any accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation, or toxic spillage or toxic seepage located on private lands which is determined to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous, or detrimental to the public safety or welfare, whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect.

(c) The county commission, in formally adopting ordinances, shall designate an enforcement agency which shall consist of the county engineer (or other technically qualified county employee or consulting engineer), county health officer or his or her designee, a fire chief from a county fire company, the county litter control officer, if the commission chooses to hire one, and two members-at-large, one of whom has a background in, or knowledge of, agricultural operations as defined in §19-19-2 of this code, selected by the county commission to serve two-year terms. The county sheriff shall serve as an ex officio member of the enforcement agency and the county officer charged with enforcing the orders of the county commission under this section.

(d) In addition to the powers and duties imposed by this section, county litter control officers shall have authority to issue citations for open dumps, as prohibited by §22-15-10(a) of this code, unlawful disposal of litter, as prohibited by §22-15A-4 of this code, and failure to provide proof of proper disposal of solid waste, as prohibited by §22C-4-10(a) of this code, after completing a training course offered by the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection: *Provided*, That any litter control officer who is trained and certified as a law-enforcement officer and whose certification is active has the same authority as any other law-enforcement officer to enforce all litter laws in this code. Nothing in this subsection supersedes the authority or duty of the Department of Environmental Protection or other law-enforcement officers to preserve law and order and enforce the litter control program.

(e) Any ordinance adopted pursuant to the provisions of this section shall provide fair and equitable rules of procedure and any other standards considered necessary to guide the enforcement agency, or its agents, in the investigation of dwelling or building conditions, accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation, or toxic spillage or toxic seepage and shall provide for fair and equitable rules of procedure for instituting and conducting hearings in the matters before the county commission. Any entrance upon premises for the purpose of making examinations shall be made in a manner that causes the least possible inconvenience to the persons in possession.

(f) (1) Complaints authorized by this section shall be brought before the county commission. Complaints shall be initiated by citation issued by the county litter control officer or petition of the county engineer (or other technically qualified county employee or consulting engineer) on behalf of, and at the direction of, the enforcement agency, but only after that agency has investigated and determined that any dwelling, building, accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation, or toxic spillage or toxic seepage is unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous, or detrimental to the public safety or welfare and should be repaired, altered, improved, vacated, removed, closed, cleaned, or demolished.

(2) The county commission shall cause the owner or owners of the private land in question to be served with a copy of the complaint. Service shall be accomplished in the manner provided in rule four of the West Virginia Rules of Civil Procedure.

(3) The complaint shall state the findings and recommendations of the enforcement agency and that unless the owner or owners of the property file with the clerk of the county commission a written request for a hearing within 10 days of receipt of the complaint, an order will be issued by the county commission implementing the recommendations of the enforcement agency.

(4) If the owner or owners of the property file a request for a hearing, the county commission shall issue an order setting this matter down for hearing within 20 days. Hearings shall be recorded by electronic device or by court reporter. The West Virginia Rules of Evidence do not apply to the proceedings, but each party has the right to present evidence and examine and cross-examine all witnesses.

(5) The enforcement agency has the burden of proving its allegation by a preponderance of the evidence and has the duty to go forward with the evidence.

(6) At the conclusion of the hearing, the county commission shall make findings of fact, determinations, and conclusions of law as to whether the dwelling or building: Is unfit for human habitation due to dilapidation; has defects that increase the hazard of fire, accidents, or other calamities; lacks ventilation, light, or sanitary facilities; or any other conditions prevailing in the dwelling or building, whether used for human habitation or not and whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect, which would cause the dwelling or other building to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous, or detrimental to the public safety or welfare; or whether there is an accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation, toxic spillage or toxic seepage on private lands which is determined to be unsafe, unsanitary, dangerous, or detrimental to the public safety or welfare, whether the result of natural or manmade force or effect.

(7) The county commission has authority to order the owner or owners thereof to repair, alter, improve, vacate, remove, close, clean up, or demolish the dwelling or building in question or to remove or clean up any accumulation of refuse or debris, overgrown vegetation, or toxic spillage or toxic seepage within a reasonable time and to impose daily civil monetary penalties on the owner or owners who fail to obey an order.

(8) Appeals from the county commission to the circuit court shall be in accordance with the provisions of §58-3-1 *et seq*. of this code.

(g) Upon the failure of the owner or owners of the private land to perform the ordered duties and obligations as set forth in the order of the county commission, the county commission may advertise for and seek contractors to make the ordered repairs, alterations, or improvements or the ordered demolition, removal, or clean up. The county commission may enter any contract with any contractor to accomplish the ordered repairs, alterations, or improvements or the ordered demolition, removal, or clean up.

(h) A civil proceeding may be brought in circuit court by the county commission against the owner or owners of the private land or other responsible party that the subject matter of the order of the county commission to subject the private land in question: (1) To a lien for the amount of the contractor’s costs in making these ordered repairs, alterations, or improvements or ordered demolition, removal, or clean up, together with any daily civil monetary penalty imposed; (2) to order and decree the sale of the private land in question to satisfy the lien; (3) to order and decree that the contractor may enter upon the private land in question at any and all times necessary to make ordered repairs, alterations, or improvements, or ordered demolition, removal, or clean up; and (4) to order the payment of all costs incurred by the county with respect to the property and for reasonable attorney fees and court costs incurred in the prosecution of the action.

(i) County commissions may receive and accept grants, subsidies, donations, and services in kind consistent with the objectives of this section.