Bear rules could mean $100 fines to Seminole residents who don't lock trash

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Amid rising concerns over black-bear encounters, Seminole County could become Florida's first local government to impose fines on people who don't lock up their trash or who unwittingly lure bruins into residential communities.

Seminole commissioners will consider an ordinance Dec. 8 aimed at stopping dangerous interactions between bears and people in neighborhoods west of Interstate 4, described by wildlife officials as the state's "epicenter of human-bear conflict."

"I don't think anyone wants this to be a punishment," Assistant County Manager Meloney Lung said of the proposed rules, which also would restrict the use of bird feeders, barbecue grills and other bear "enticements" such as outdoor pet bowls.

"This is a good place to start," she said. "It's [encouraging] a necessary change of habits."

Garbage, bird seed, pet food and grill drippings are food sources that often draw
bears from woodlands and conservation areas such as those around Wekiwa Springs into neighborhoods where they sometimes clash with people.

Lung said the county drafted the ordinance with help from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's bear experts, who blame unsecured trash for the spike in the number of encounters between people and the animals.

It also borrowed parts of laws used in Colorado and Tennessee, both of which have large bear populations.

If adopted, the rules would apply to residents and businesses in a newly created "West Seminole County Urban Bear Management Area," which stretches the length of the county from just east of Interstate 4 to the western county line.

It includes neighborhoods where bears have mauled three women in separate episodes in the past two years.

The ordinance would not mandate use of lock-top, bear-resistant trash containers, as some experts had urged, but it encourages their use. It requires residents who use less secure bins to keep them in a garage, shed or other structure until trash day.

"It's a public safety issue for us," said commission Chairman John Horan, hopeful the board adopts the measure.

Commissioner Lee Constantine, who pushed unsuccessfully to use public money to buy bear-resistant trash cans for 23,000 households west of I-4, said he had not had sufficient time to study the ordinance but worried it might create "bear-can police."

The proposed ordinance would authorize Seminole County's code-enforcement officers — and empower some employees of the county's solid-waste division — to issue warnings and citations. Offenders could face civil fines of $100.

Constantine still prefers the county provide bear-resistant cans to homes on the west side.

"That's what experts say is the only final solution," he said.

The western part of the county has spawned more than 6,600 calls to a state nuisance-bear hotline since 2008, with callers complaining about bears loitering in backyards, breaking through pool screens, killing pets and raiding garbage cans.

Chuck O'Neal, director of Speak Up Wekiva, a Lake Mary-based group that fought to stop last month's bear hunt, described the draft ordinance as a "bold step" to eliminate neighborhood lures for bears in a region now infamous for them.

He said he hoped the county would approve the new rules and that other "bear-prone" counties would do so, too.

Gary Kaleita, a lawyer and a resident of Wingfield North who last year drafted "bear-wise" rules for his Seminole County homeowners association, said the proposed
ordinance "has some good points ... but unfortunately does not go far enough."

The rules allow people with bear-resistant cans to store them outside, which he said is a bad idea.

"Bears can still see [and] smell them and are attracted to investigate them if no other food is around," said Kaleita, a partner with the Orlando firm of Lowndes, Drosdick, Doster, Kantor & Reed.

The county's proposed ordinance won praise from Thomas Eason, a wildlife biologist and FWC director of the division of habitat and species conservation, who called it "a good first big step" toward solving neighborhood bear problems.

Seminole is one of 14 counties that collectively account for 90 percent of the state's nuisance-bear calls. Orange, Lake and Volusia counties are in that group, too, and ought to consider similar rules for "bear-prone" areas, Eason said.