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Competing celebrations end war of words

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MONROE COUNTY -- The "Conch Republic" is whole again.

From Key Largo to Key West, a war of words that was waged in the courts has been mediated and resolved.

"The secession of the Northernmost Territories has ended in reunification," according to "Sir" Peter Anderson, a Key West merchant who took the Upper Keys Business Group to court to stop it from using the "Conch Republic" name as part of a celebration of the island chain's mock secession from the United States.

Anderson had used the name since 1991 to promote Key West's Conch Republic Independence Celebration and, after a financial disagreement, he objected in 2008 to the Upper Keys Business Group staging its own 10-day Conch Republic festival to coincide with his Key West event.

The Conch Republic Independence Celebration is a satirical celebration based on the feigned secession of the Florida Keys after federal officers set up a road block at the top of the 18-Mile Stretch after 1982's Mariel boatlift brought more than 100,000 Cuban refugees to the Keys and South Florida.

After Anderson convinced the Monroe County Commission to block Tourist Development Council funds earmarked for the Upper Keys' celebration, he sued the Key Largo-based organization to halt its event, claiming the "Conch Republic" name was his valid mark.

In 2010 Circuit Court Judge Luis Garcia ruled against Anderson, determining that the mark was generic and that "the right to celebrate a local historical event belongs to no one man."

Anderson then appealed to a higher court.

After the Third District Court of Appeals reversed Garcia's ruling, the local judge sent both parties into mediation.

Last week Howard Kolbenheyer, president of the Upper Keys Business Group, told the Free Press that, after four hours of mediation in Key West, both sides have agreed to call a truce.

"This is the 30th anniversary [of the Mariel Boat Lift] this April and we wanted to get back together," said Kolbenheyer, who owns Snapper's Waterfront Restaurant in Key Largo.

"We're doing our own thing this year, but next year we'll try to work together," Kolbenheyer said. "We will have a February armistice meeting in Marathon, and our friend Mike Puto will be working toward a Keys-wide celebration the following year."

Anderson said a reunification ceremony is in the works and the public will be invited.

"We'll tell about the details as we [learn] them, but for now we are all very busy people," he said. "One thing we can be sure of is, it will be fun. I am thrilled that the Conch Republic is reunified."

Kolbenheyer echoed those sentiments.

"The Conch Republic is whole once again, from Key West to Key Largo," he said. "We're all under the same flag as it should have been from the beginning."

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