

Oak Ridge North tweaks ordinance in effort to ban sex robot brothels, businesses

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Photo: Courtesy of RLSD.

After a proposed sex robot brothel was halted in Houston, local cities and counties around the region are re-examining their sexually oriented business ordinances and regulations. The proposed hotel in Houston would have been supplied from Real Love Sex Dolls, one of the largest sellers of ultra-realistic dolls in the U.S. located in Austin, Texas. Customers would rent the dolls under the proposal.



Photo: Courtesy of RLSD.

Oak Ridge North on Nov. 8 voted unanimously to amend their sexually oriented business ordinance to prohibit the temporary rental or use of anthropomorphic sex devices, such as this doll from Real Love Sex Dolls, one of the largest sellers of ultra-realistic dolls in the U.S. located in Austin, Texas.

Oak Ridge North has banned sex robots and other anthropomorphic sexual devices from being rented or otherwise used temporarily within the city limits. City Council members on Thursday, Nov. 8, voted unanimously to amend the city's sexually oriented business ordinance following a controversy this fall in Houston where a company planned a facility that allowed people to rent human-like sex robots for temporary use. The Houston City Council and the Harris County Commissioners Court both recently blocked the robot brothel.

Oak Ridge North City Manager Richard Derr said he became aware of the sex robot issue after reading several articles in the Houston Chronicle, which detailed the attempt to open the robot brothel in the city. He said Oak Ridge North, to his knowledge, has never had a sexually-oriented business operate within city limits, and he believes residents would be against the idea as it may not be in line with the city's ideals.

"I was proactive. (The issue) Raised the bar of what could be allowed if a business did that here," Derr said. (This) Doesn't mean (the city) would not approve (a sexually oriented business), you cannot ban them from applying. I would think the council would be cautious."

Oak Ridge North's changes include a statement that it is the intent of the city to "protect the health, safety and welfare and well-being of its citizens," and that the city "finds that current and emerging technologies in the adult entertainment industry require changes to the city code of ordinances." The amendment deleted previous definitions of "adult arcade" and redefined several terms in the ordinance.

The new wording that was added to the original ordinance, Derr explained, expands the definition of what an "adult arcade" is as well as widening the definition of an "adult arcade device" and what is defined as "sexually oriented entertainment." Generally, an "adult arcade" is defined as a business where adults can pay money to view sexually oriented materials, such as a booth or small movie theater. "This (new change) expanded the definitions in our sexually-oriented business ordinance," he added. "It has really expanded the definition to include those who would use (the devices) in a business."

In addition to the various definition changes, Derr said the new wording in the ordinance prohibits the in-business testing or practice use of life-sized, human-like anthropomorphic dolls and sexual devices such as replicas of male and female genitalia. The items can still be sold, however the items cannot be used inside the business. A business could be a store, hotel or similar premise where the sex robot or other devices are located for sale.

"The more important thing was the dolls, the life-sized dolls, it brings the question of can they use dolls on a business premise," Derr added. "They can purchase (the devices) but they cannot 'try it on' or use it inside the business ... not give it a 'test drive,' so to speak. (The new wording) does not stop the sale of that kind of thing."

The Woodlands, Shenandoah take notice

Oak Ridge North isn't the only local community keeping its eye on the sex robot brothel issue. The issue has come up in The Woodlands — where a resident recently asked the township's directors during a public comment session of a meeting to prevent such a business from coming to The Woodlands. Shenandoah also is looking at the issue, city officials said.

Debbie Pilcher, communications officer for the city of Shenandoah, said while no action has been taken, the Shenandoah City Council and Mayor Ritch Wheeler have been following the sex robot hotel developments in the region in the event proponents or owners of the business attempt to locate it elsewhere, including possibly in Shenandoah.

“We do have a sexually oriented business ordinance. They (the council) are following the issue,” Pilcher said. “When something hits like that (the sex robot brothel) and it has a strange flavor to it, anywhere you go, all other governments watch to see how they dealt with it. It is so unusual, I don’t think anyone thinks of it ... it had not crossed their minds.”

Shenandoah recently amended an ordinance restricting where registered sex offenders can reside within the city limits, and Pilcher said that effort was part of a commitment to a higher quality of life and safety in the city she called “a bedroom community.” “Anytime anything sexual comes up, we examine it. It is one of those things they watch out for, anything sexually oriented,” Pilcher added. “It has almost become humorous, it is sad. Who would have ever thought of having a hotel with robots (for sex)? This is something 1984-ish and now it is a reality.”

In The Woodlands, the issue of prohibiting a sexually oriented business is a bit more complicated because the community is not an incorporated city, but is a special purpose district and a township. Because the township is not incorporated, regulation of sexually oriented businesses is the responsibility of Montgomery County as well as the Howard Hughes Corp. Nick Wolda, the spokesperson for The Woodlands Township, said all business usage issues and the types of businesses allowed in the township are regulated solely by the Howard Hughes Corp.

“The types of businesses allowed in The Woodlands are established by deed restrictions and covenants placed on the land and enforced by The Woodlands Development Company when they develop and or sell the property,” Wolda wrote in an email to The Villager. “The Woodlands Township enforces the general covenants placed on property within its boundaries and does not regulate private deed restrictions of the developer establishing the types of businesses located on such properties.”

Alex Sutton, co-president of The Woodlands Development Company explained the developer’s policy on sexually oriented businesses in The Woodlands.

“Retail parcels we conveyed had restrictions imposed in the deed that expressly prohibited establishments from selling or exhibiting sexually-explicit materials,” Sutton said in a written statement. “In other instances, deeds have allowed for only certain uses and those permitted uses would not have included a sexually-oriented business.”

Montgomery County officials aware of issue

The Montgomery County Commissioners Court revised the 34-page county policy on sexually oriented businesses in May 2017, and a review of the document finds it does not include any wording related to sex robot brothels or hotels. There are several sections of the policy that define an “adult arcade,” adult bookstores or video stores and adult motels. Included in the policy are definitions of a “sex device” and a “sex device shop.”

John McKinney, an assistant county attorney with Montgomery County, said to his knowledge, the county's sexually oriented business regulations do not have anything as specific as dealing with sex robot brothels or rentals, however McKinney noted that county officials and law enforcement have become aware of the emerging technology as it relates to sex robots.

"There are some provisions for adult video stores, it identifies different items that may be found there, but I don't think we have anything directly on that point (of sex robots)," McKinney said. "We are aware of (the issue) and in the process of determining if any changes need to be made. It is in consideration and we'll be working with law enforcement to update our policies."

McKinney said he and others had learned about the proposed robot brothel through various news reports and normal law enforcement duties. The idea of a sex robot brothel was never on the minds of county leaders in 2017, the last time the policy was revised, he admitted.

"We were shocked to even find out about the hotel," McKinney said. "It almost turns you red thinking about it."