

HardisonInk.com

Hope delayed for county courthouse remedies



Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Administrator Paul Silverman speaks to the County Commission.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 22, 2016 at 3:07 p.m.

BRONSON -- Problems with the Levy County Courthouse building has been reviewed by a committee for a year, according to conversation at the Tuesday (Dec 20) meeting of the Levy County Commission.

However a 3-2 vote stalled the approval of a recommendation to pay an architect to design methods to alleviate the problems with construction to revise the existing building or to build a whole new structure.

As the poet Langston Hughes (Feb. 1, 1902 - May 22, 1967) asked in part, "What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/Like a raisin in the sun?"

In this instance, there is no answer yet.

HardisonInk.com



County Commission Chairman John Meeks



County Commissioner Rock Meeks

HardisonInk.com



County Commissioner Matt Brooks



County Commissioner Lilly Rooks

HardisonInk.com



County Commissioner Mike Joyner

The problems will simply persist. However, determining a remedy for the problems is now stalled until the county finds out about using \$1.33 million that is already set aside for a future courthouse or for repairing problems in the current building.

The grants in aid to improve the courthouse either can or cannot be used to retain an architect to create the two plans, but as of Tuesday there was no clear answer on that question.

There is \$600,000 available now for replacing windows or similar maintenance and improvement activities at the courthouse, and that includes hiring an architect to make plans; however, given the uncertainty about the possible uses for the \$1.33 million, progress has stalled on moving forward with anything.

Discussion on Tuesday showed what appears to be a majority opinion to not spend any of the \$600,000 part of the budget on an architect.

Finding a source for funding the repairs or replacement of the courthouse is another matter that is as firm as quicksand, too -- as of Tuesday.

Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Administrator Paul Silverman, one of the members of the Court Facilities Committee, which is chaired by Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Chief Judge Robert E. Roundtree Jr., appeared before the County Commission on Tuesday.

All of the Levy County constitutional officers – County Clerk Danny Shipp, Property Appraiser Osborn “Oz” Barker, Tax Collector Linda Fugate, Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones and the County Commission are part of the committee. Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks represents the County Commission on the committee.

The committee found there are “fairly significant deficiencies in the courthouse” that relate to safety, space, condition and to accessibility, Silverman said.

The Florida Legislature designated in 2008 the \$1.33 million to Levy County for courthouse issues, Silverman said. That money does exist, but there is not a definitive answer as to whether it can be used as the committee recommends – to hire an architect familiar with courthouses to create the two sets of plans – one to refurbish and one to replace.

To start the process to find the most cost-effective approach to resolving issues, Silverman said the committee determined, is to hire an architect to create those two plans.

HardisonInk.com

County Commissioner Mike Joyner said farmer and ranchers are going to go bankrupt this year in Levy County due to a drought that reduced crop yields, and a tough market for livestock.

Joyner said that since agriculture is among the large economic engines in the county, this will have a ripple effect to reduce overall revenue throughout the county. Yankeetown Mayor Debra Weiss said the loss of property in coastal communities due to Hurricane Hermine will lessen the tax base in the coming year too.

There were at least a couple of taxpayers in the audience on Tuesday who indicated their probable discontent with the possibility of having to pay more taxes to bring the courthouse up to whatever minimal standard is required by the Florida Supreme Court or any higher or lower courts.

Joyner, who is a retired Levy County Sheriff's Office courthouse bailiff, said he knows about the problems in the courthouse from years ago. He recognizes that the issues need to be resolved, but he feels this is a bad year to start that process.

Joyner made the first motion of the day in this matter. His motion to hire an architect to only make one set of plans – to fix the current courthouse, but not to have a plan for a whole new courthouse – died for lack of a second.

A motion to table the matter was made by County Commissioner Rock Meeks and it was seconded by County Commissioner Lilly Rooks. County Commissioner Matt Brooks joined in the Meeks-Rooks motion to make a 3-2 vote.

Commission Chairman Meeks and Commissioner Joyner were in the minority of the vote to table the matter.

The reason to stall the requested approval to hire an architect was due to there being no clear answer on whether the county could use part of the \$1.33 million for an architect.

Currently, there has been no emergency order made by the Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Administrator's Office or the chief judge to demand the county to move forward with improving the courthouse.

The Trial Court Administrator's Office is the executive office of the circuit. Silverman is responsible for the management of the trial courts and serves as the principal liaison between the Eighth Judicial Circuit and the Office of the State Courts Administrator.

The Office of the State Courts Administrators is the administrative arm of the Florida Supreme Court, and the office helps to ensure that the Florida Court System runs smoothly, particularly where administrative and funding issues are concerned.