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Levy County agrees to \$1.3 million step toward county courthouse safety improvements



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

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By Jeff M. Hardison

BRONSON – By a unanimous vote, the Levy County Board of County Commissioner agreed Tuesday (May 2) to move forward with seeking architectural assistance to make the courthouse safer.

Right now, the limit of expense is set by the County Commission at \$1.33 million, which has been sitting available for several years from the Florida Legislature of years gone by.

People who are having civil hearings in the Levy County Courthouse on occasion must walk down a hall where on occasion there are both suspected and convicted felons of violent crimes.

With members of the general public having to rub elbows with dangerous and violent lawbreakers on occasion, Florida State Courts Administrator Patricia Jameson and Florida Eighth Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Toby S. Monaco are continuing to perform the duties of their predecessors for the past many years.

Circuit Court Judge Monaco began his term on Jan. 1, 2017. Jameson began her service as Florida Courts Administrator on July 1, 2014.

Before Jameson, there was Elisabeth H. Goodner (serving 2003-2014).

The \$1.33 million became available to Levy County between the years of 2004 and 2008, and it has not been used during that nine to 13 years since it was available.

Issues with lack of space for court functions and for constitutional officers are among the problems at the old courthouse, but reducing danger to the general public is what has brought the call for spending money to improve that structure to the tipping point where it is now.

Leaders in the state court system and the judicial circuit are telling the county, again, to do something about this dilemma.

The problem of safety in the Levy County Courthouse is the single-most driving factor for new design and construction of parts of that building.

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Beyond the civil and criminal functions of the Levy County Court and the Levy County part of the Eighth Judicial Circuit, which includes Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Union counties, there are other Levy County Constitutional officers with business in that building.

Levy County Clerk Danny J. Shipp, Levy County Tax Collector Linda Fugate, Levy County Property Appraiser Osborn "Oz" Barker and the Levy County Board of County Commissioners all have offices in that structure as well.

Eighth Judicial Circuit Trial Court Administrator Paul Silverman spoke to the County Commission again as he seeks to resolve the issue of danger to people in the courthouse.

As Court Administrator, 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. Hence he works with the honorable Judge Monaco and State Courts Administrator Jameson.

On Tuesday, Silverman was providing the County Commission with a recommendation, again, from the Levy County Constitutional and Court Facilities Committee, which includes the county's constitutional officers and judges.

The committee had recommended to the County Commission that it seek designs for renovating the courthouse and for building a whole new courthouse.

On Tuesday, Silverman offered an alternative recommendation as well.

"Perhaps you would like to use the grant money we have," Silverman said, "Which is \$1.33 million to retain an architect to simply tell us what we can do for \$1.33 million – something that would not cost the county any money."

He concedes this is only a stop-gap measure that will not fix the courthouse completely; however, he reminded the five county leaders, it is that amount of money being put toward a solution to the problems.

Commission Chairman John Meeks saw and seized the opportunity to share his opinion about the state imposing unfunded mandates on the counties.

"Mr. Silverman, with all due respect," Meeks said, "if the state of Florida don't (doesn't) get off our backs, y'all gonna' take this courthouse over yourself, because y'all are going to bankrupt county government.

"The additional \$25,000 Homestead Exemption that the Florida Senate passed yesterday (May 1)," Meeks continued, "is going back to the House of Representatives today (May 2) and it is going to make our jobs even more difficult."

The reduction of property tax revenue from that added exemption from taxes would affect all Florida counties, but smaller rural counties may be even more hard hit than urban counties.

Silverman shared with Meeks that the state is not seeking to make the courthouse facilities fancier. The first goal is to reduce the risk of injury or death to members of the public as a result of being in too close proximity with dangerous, violent criminals.

Silverman said he will confer with Levy County Sheriff Bobby McCallum in that regard too.

Levy County Commissioner Mike Joyner, a retired law enforcement officer, said he worked in the Levy County Courthouse with the late Judge David Glant for several years. Joyner said security is a problem in the courthouse.

Joyner made the motion to accept the alternative recommendation to seek an architect to determine what the county can do to revise the structure for more safety.

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County Attorney Anne Bast Brown watches to assure the state grant is properly worded to cover the costs that are approved.

County Attorney Anne Bast Brown intimated that there may be a need to seek some slight revisions to some of the verbiage in the grant to improve the Levy County Courthouse.

Brown said she wants the agreement with the state to show this money can be used by the county for designing and not just for studying the structure.

Silverman said he cannot imagine an intention to start construction without an architectural design rather than just a study.

During part of the discussion, Joyner mentioned his appreciation for County Clerk Shipp in recent years adding improvements in the civil division on the second floor to make employees safer.

After more discussion, the County Commission agreed to Joyner's motion to create a request for proposals from architectural firms for this job.