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County Commission considers buying old Bronson High School



Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean tells the County Commission on Tuesday that he was contacted by the School Board with an offer for the County Commission to buy the former Bronson High School property.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © April 26, 2018 at 10:08 a.m.

BRONSON -- Location, location, location.



County Commission
Chairman John Meeks

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County Commission Vice Chairman Mike Joyner



County Commissioner Matt Brooks

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County Commissioner Lilly Rooks



County Commissioner Rock Meeks

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County Clerk Danny Shipp



(from left) Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Sullivan, Levy County Property Appraiser Oz Barker and Levy County Tax Collector Linda Fugate are seen Tuesday morning (April 24) in the County Commission meeting room. Sheriff Bobby McCallum was at a funeral in Bell at the time.

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This is one of the mantras of buyers and sellers of real estate.

On Tuesday (April 24), the Levy County Board of County Commissioners heard about a proposed sale of property adjacent to the Levy County Courthouse -- the former site of Bronson High School.

County Coordinator Wilbur Dean told the five commissioners that he had been contacted by the School Board to start negotiating the sale again.

When the new Bronson Middle High School came into being, the old BHS was changed into the site for students who had disciplinary problems to the extent that they needed to be separated from the general student population. At one point it was named Hilltop. Then it became named Levy Learning Academy.

Now the School Board has told County Coordinator Dean that if the county does not want to buy the property, it might use the property for its own administrative needs.

Although no cold and hard figures are on the slate yet, Dean said the current possible price is in the \$38 to \$40 a square-foot range, and that the total price is going to be far below \$2 million.

Dean said he has spoken with Sheriff Bobby McCallum, County Clerk Danny Shipp, Property Appraiser Osborn "Oz" Barker, Tax Collector Linda Fugate, County Judge J.T. "Tim" Browning and Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones. The county coordinator also has spoken, he said, with administrative officials in the Eighth Judicial Circuit who conduct trials in the courtrooms of the courthouse.

The Levy County Board of County Commissioners "has a small window of time" to make this purchase from the Levy County School Board, Dean said.

In a telephone interview Thursday morning (April 26) Levy County School Board Member Chris Cowart said Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison has not approached the School Board yet with information about the sale of that property.

Cowart added, however, that all property the Levy County School Board owns that is not being totally utilized should be sold as surplus if this will benefit the people of Levy County.

As a general policy, the Levy County School Board favors performing actions that are going to be beneficial to the Levy County taxpayers, Cowart said, and he mentioned that he is aware of issues with security, office space and courtroom space at the Levy County Courthouse. Therefore, if the School Board and County Commission can reach an agreement on the sale of that property and given that it will help the people of Levy County, then Cowart would be in favor of that deal.

Edison was in Orlando at a school-business oriented meeting on Thursday and was unable to be reached.

As for the County Commission's action on Tuesday morning, County Commissioner Mike Joyner started to make a motion but County Commission Chairman John Meeks said there would be no need for a motion.

There was a consensus of the Levy County Commission to have County Coordinator Dean work with Superintendent of Schools Edison to negotiate a sale proposal.

County Finance Officer Jared Blanton answered some preliminary questions and indicated that he did not see a potential need for the county to have to sell municipal bonds to subsidize this purchase. From past discussions at the County Commission, it has become clear that this county has had problems with courtroom security due to the age of the structure and the lack of space.

Dean said he toured the campus that is potentially going to be sold. Levy County Commission maintenance staff and Levy County School Board maintenance staff were on the tour.

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“The buildings and the campus over there have been maintained very well,” Dean said. “All the A/C, the computer lines, a lot of that is very updated. I know (Levy County Maintenance Director) Jimmy Jones was very impressed by the things they have done.”

Dean said the addition of this property is what he sees as the most cost-effective manner to alleviate space and security issues at the courthouse. This will add space, too, he said, so that county building, zoning and planning departments could be moved off of Hathaway Avenue (U.S. Alt. 27) so that people could visit one area for building and zoning matters, as well as other county business.

He added that by moving county offices from the main street in Bronson would open that property for purchase by a private interest, which not only would provide revenue to Levy County from the sale, but it would help increase the tax base.

With the potential to relocate the Levy County Tax Collector’s Office and the Levy County Property Appraiser’s Office to an area away from the courthouse, it would make those locations even more handicap accessible, Dean said, while freeing space at the courthouse to improve security for judges, lawyers, civil litigants and criminal defendants.

County Commission Chairman Meeks said this could help the county at least delay a mandate to build a new courthouse, adding that this would save a considerable amount of tax dollars.

The tentative projected cost of a \$12 million courthouse, Chairman Meeks said, was opposed by him vehemently. That \$12 million is just a base estimate to build the building, he said, and does not include the cost of furniture revisions for equipment and the like.

Chairman Meeks said this potential purchase of School Board property “may not be ideal” but he sees it as “a very workable situation.”

After more discussion, including input from Levy County Tax Collector Linda Fugate and Levy County Property Appraiser Oz Barker, the County Commission gave County Coordinator Dean the green light to move forward with negotiations to buy the former Bronson High School property.

In a telephone interview with Levy County Sheriff Bobby McCallum on Thursday morning (April 26), he indicated that he sees this as a positive action. The sheriff mentioned that he is required by law to provide security for the courts and judges.

The other county offices in the courthouse now enjoy a level of security by the LCSO, however if those offices moved to the former BHS campus, then there may be a need for discussion about more funding for the LCSO to provide security there too.

Regardless of whether the County Commission buys BHS from the School Board, Sheriff McCallum is seeing this coming budget year as being a time when he must request an increase in tax revenue for the Sheriff’s Office, because there are mandatory minimum standards that must be met by law; and to meet those requirements will require what may be the most significant Sheriff’s Office budget increase in the history of Levy County, he said.