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County officials discuss problems hosting city court in law enforcement center

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The Union County Board of Supervisors for the past couple of years has allowed the City of New Albany to hold municipal court in the justice courtroom at the county law enforcement center on Carter Avenue, but that may change.

The topic came up at last week's board meeting.

The city had been using a small area in the basement of the police department, which is the old city hall, for court for many years. As the department grew and more clerks were needed, the police department needed to take over that space for office use, however. That's when city court was moved to the justice courtroom on Wednesdays (justice court is held mostly on Tuesdays).

While the number of city cases may be growing, the biggest problem seems to be the people who are tying up justice court clerks asking for information and trying to pay city fines. Because they are told to go to the jail building for court, they think that is where they need to go to pay fines. This prevents the clerks from doing the work they are supposed to be doing, officials say.

The city had the opportunity to share the cost of the law enforcement center before it was built but officials decided not to; now, they pay the county to house city prisoners only.

One solution may be to charge the city for use of the courtroom to help pay for needed help in the justice court clerk's office. Another may simply be to have them find another space that could be renovated for city use.

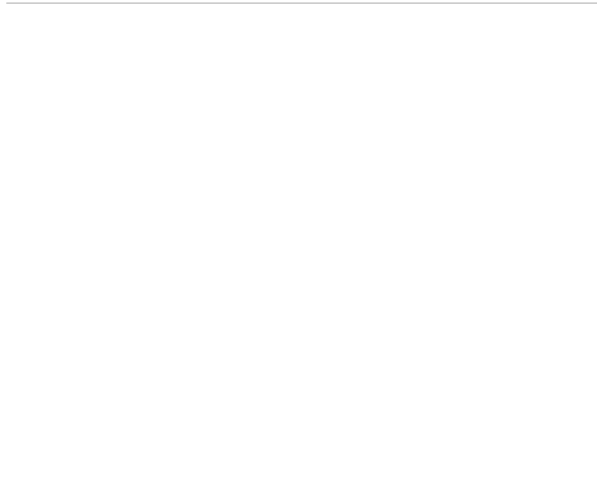
The clerks who were more recently in the basement of the police department were moved into the adjacent building on Bankhead Street due to flooding and other issues so that space is available again.

Of course, the need for a new city police department to replace the obsolete present building has been argued for some time.

Supervisors did not indicate they wanted to take any action immediately, only that the problem needs addressing.

Also Monday last week, supervisors accepted a letter of resignation from deputy circuit clerk Rhonda Dowdy, helping to conclude a case that had been continuing for several months.

In July, investigators for the Attorney General's office arrested Dowdy and charged her with one count of voter fraud, changing a non-resident's address to an in-county address in return for a vote for a specific candidate. Her uncle, Tommy Wilhite, a former sheriff, was again a candidate for that office at the time.



A few weeks ago Dowdy pleaded guilty to a criminal information (which means the case does not go before a grand jury) according to District Attorney Ben Creekmore. She was sentenced to two years' unsupervised probation under the non-adjudication statute.

According to Creekmore, this statute is used fairly often and is designed for non-violent first offenders in cases not involving drugs. If a defendant successfully completes probation the charges may be dropped at the end of that period and the defendant may be able to petition the court for full expungement of his or her record. Dowdy's case was described as likely being an isolated incident rather than part of any pattern. Her resignation from the clerk's office was effective Oct. 30 and she had been on unpaid leave prior to that since her arrest. She had worked in the clerk's office 28 years.

Also Monday, supervisors heard from Linda Turner, local representative of the Mississippi Tobacco-Free Coalition. She said because of then-attorney general Mike Moore's successful lawsuit against U. S. tobacco companies, money comes into the state every year for anti-tobacco use.

She said she already works with schools, the City of New Albany and MSU Extension Service and offered her service to the county, if county officials ever decide to go smoke-free. Turner pointed out county buildings and schools are already smoke-free thanks to state law so any added county enforcement would cover any business with at least one employee. She said second-hand smoke not only causes health issues but so-called "third-hand smoke" destroys buildings through property damage.

Turner said if the county officials decide they want to move forward, the coalition has grants of \$5,000 and above to start the conversation about changing.

Board President Danny Jordan said he did not think they wanted to start any action now because four new board members will be coming on Jan. 1 and the new board might want to consider it.

At this week's meeting, Jordan welcomed newly elected supervisors Chad Coffey, Dave Kitchens and Steve Watson. He had invited the four incoming board members so they could begin to see what happens at the weekly meetings. The fourth new supervisor, Evan Denton, was unable to attend due to work commitments.

In other business during the two meetings supervisors:

- Gave New Albany Gazette publisher Wayne Mitchell permission to use the former National Guard Armory building for packing boxes as part of the annual Sharing at Christmas project. Food will be delivered to the armory and boxes packed starting Dec. 10 and boxes of food and toys will go out to about 250 needy Union County families Dec. 16.
- Approved paying dues, registration and travel expenses for the county election commissioners to attend their annual meeting in Philadelphia Jan. 20-27.
- Approved paying per diem expenses for four of the five election commissioners for September and paying them and circuit clerk Phyllis Stanford for purging the voter rolls in conjunction with the election.
- Approved paying the circuit clerk for holding the year's second grand jury session.
- Voted, at the request of county fire coordinator Steve Coker, to end the county-wide burning ban. Recent rains have rid the area of the dangerous dry conditions they led to the ban two weeks ago.
- Accepted on the property rolls a new brush truck from the Center Fire Department. Coker said it replaced an old truck declared surplus by the forestry department years ago.
- Received tax assessor-collector Randy Owen's list of vehicle tags that had been turned in the past month and are required to be destroyed.
- Approved the October claims docket and board minutes as well as the county road work plan for November.
- Approved deleting a weed cutter from the sheriff's department inventory.
- Approved a recommendation from Sheriff Jimmy Edwards to transfer Chris Whitehead from part-time dispatcher to part-time deputy to help balance workloads.
- Gave Sheriff Edwards permission to sign up for an online service called Leadsonline. Edwards said the service is a large database that serves as a registry for scrap metal dealers, pawnshops and stores that sell potential drug precursors. Edwards called it a "big tool" for solving burglaries and returning stolen items, which now often requires paying visits or at least making calls to large numbers of businesses in the region. Cost to the department is \$1,758 per year and the fee must be made in one payment. Board president Jordan

and other supervisors said they have no problem with trying out the service as long as the sheriff's office has the money available.

- Approved advertising for annual bids on supplies such as road materials. The bids will be received Dec. 14.
- Approved one school bus turnaround in the Fifth District.
- Approved an order rejecting a bid submitted for resurfacing CR 81 earlier this year. The bid was rejected because supervisors found they could bundle this project with several other resurfacing projects throughout the county.
- Approved hiring a part-time employee for Youth Court. Department of Human Services and court regulations have changed, no longer permitting the youth court referee or others to enter certain data, which means a designated person must be hired. Callie Creekmore will be in this position and no county funds will be needed to pay her.
- Approved paying half the cost of the new bridge constructed on Oxford Road to provide safe access for ambulances and school buses, since the road is one of the main access routes to the hospital emergency room. The city and county are splitting costs because the unsafe old bridge was on the county state-aid road system. The county's share is \$80,854.
- Heard from county fire coordinator Steve Coker that the primary county trucks passed their required pump tests with only minor repairs needed.
- Discussed a road issue at Myrtle. Someone has moved on what used to be CR 297, also known as Springdale Lakes road and needs an E-911 address for mail purposes. However, it was determined that after Myrtle annexed land about 14 years ago, CR 297 was removed from the county road inventory in the belief that the road had been annexed. Apparently only part of the road was actually annexed but the county ceased maintaining the road and, once 10 years had passed, that meant the road had been legally abandoned anyway. County officials are trying to determine a solution.

The next regularly scheduled meeting of the Union County Board of Supervisors will be at 10 a.m. next Monday, Nov. 16, in the boardroom of the Union County chancery building.