

County coroner is no longer allowed to use WCMH as a holding facility

Written by George Browning

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Washington County Memorial Hospital's pending bankruptcy is affecting more than just the local ambulance service. Washington County Coroner Rondale Brishaber and the coroner's office is also feeling the pinch.

Brishaber and deputy coroner Steve Garloch attended the county commissioner's meeting Dec. 8 to inform them that due to the hospital's situation, there is no longer a place locally to take bodies.

Garloch told commissioners that the county is no longer permitted to take bodies to WCMH as a holding facility.

That's something local officials expected might happen after the hospital's bankruptcy is complete, but they weren't ready for it with three weeks remaining in 2009.

That left commissioners discussing alternatives.

President Lana Sullivan asked if any of the area funeral homes had a cooler on site that the county could use until a permanent solution is reached.

Garloch said he and Brishaber had already thought of that and none of them do.

Another option is for the county to purchase the property of Richard and Patricia Williams on the corner Anson Street and State Road 56.

If purchased, that location would be used to not only house the holding facility for bodies picked up by the coroner's office. It would also house the local EMS service.

The commissioners voted to hire two appraisers, Ervin Day and E.E. Martin. When they have their appraisals finished, the county could purchase the property for no more than the highest amount of the two appraisals.

"The county has needs," Sullivan said. "There is a need for storage, EMS, a cooling unit and with land use planning coming, they are going to need space to establish those tasks."

Purchasing the property is a long term solution, but it doesn't help with the now.

Brishaber said the Dec. 8 shooting of Ronald Lee Chastain Jr. could have been an issue if not for an autopsy ordered by the Indiana State Police.

"We took him straight down to Louisville," Brishaber said. "It could have been an issue, but my decision was to load him in the van and take him straight down to Louisville.

"Right now, if there is an autopsy, we have to get them straight to Louisville or straight to Bedford. I can't say the, 'hospital' because our hospital won't let us do it."

Commissioner John Mishler said the reason for the hospital not allowing the use of its cooler is the same reason they can't house the ambulance service there.

"It's hard to explain, but the Medicare reimbursement (the hospital) receives is based on the square footage of the hospital being used for the actual hospital operations," he said. "If you have non-hospital operations going on within the hospital, Medicare deducts so much per square foot."

Garloch said even if it is a necessary step, he feels like the hospital should have waited until the first of the year to pull the rug.

Brishaber agreed and while the Dec. 8 homicide didn't cause a problem, he can't guarantee the next one won't.

"This is an important factor that people are over-looking," Brishaber said. "We need to have a morgue or a holding facility or something somewhere. If (WCMH) is not willing to do it, we have to have something."

Brishaber had to leave the Dec. 8 commissioners' meeting before his turn on the agenda and they asked him to come back at their Dec. 16 meeting.

All three commissioners seemed to agree that a cooler, which is estimated to cost

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approximately \$10,000, will have to be purchased and stored some place, until a permanent location is obtained.