

Does money really grow on trees? It just might, according to the Washington County Council. Cutting down trees to sell as timber was just one of many financial matters discussed at the council's monthly meeting, held on June 4.

The county's debt was the main topic throughout the night's conversations and it weighed uncomfortably on every issue brought before the council.

Judge Larry Medlock was present to talk about his concerns regarding the jury pay fund. "We're only halfway through the year and the budget is almost gone," Judge Medlock said about the fund, which initially held \$1500.

One reason the fund has been depleted so quickly is due to the ongoing case of Tammy Spengler, who's trial recently wrapped up with a guilty verdict, and Timothy Orman, who's trial is expected to begin July 9. Both were arrested last year on murder charges.

The council said there was nowhere to pull extra money from in the county budget for jury pay, and they would simply have to tackle new legal expenses as they come.

Animal Control Officer Randy Lee was in attendance for the second time in as many months, again requesting funds from the council to help with upkeep costs at the Washington County animal shelter. The asking price is \$20,000.

Lee, who has been in talks with Mayor Bower and other city officials, said that the county was "not paying our fair share," citing that the city pays \$132,000 a year to maintain the animal shelter while the county only contribute \$112,000. Pekin also contributes \$1000 to the shelter, but they are the only other town besides Salem that currently pitches in.

It was suggested that the task of running the animal shelter really shouldn't be split between two entities, and that either the city or the county needs to take full responsibility of the facility. However, ideas on how this transference could be handled were not discussed.

The council talked about the bridge repair fund, which has also been vanishing this year in the wake of repairs to the Kennedy bridge and Bridge 113, among other projects. After much discussion, the council approved an ordinance to transfer a little over \$65,000 of newly received money to the road projects fund, which includes bridge repairs.

The council recently acquired these excess funds after a state error resulted in the state government providing Washington County less money than were suppose to have received last year. Before this transfer, the bridge repair fund sat at \$90,000.

In other news, the idea was proposed that the county could clear away part of its debt by cutting down trees in Washington County's park systems and selling them as timber. If approved, the process would be a selective cut that only permitted trees in closed off areas away from public access to be chopped down. In addition to this, for every tree that was cut down, five more would be planted in its place.

Park board representative Eric Worley protested the plan, stating that there was "no way to cut trees without making a mess." He said cutting down trees for the purpose of profit would tarnish the beauty and integrity of the park, leaving unsightly holes behind. The council agreed to look further into the logging plan, but they did not take a definitive side in the debate.

Worley's chief reason for attending the meeting was to ask about how the council intended to pay off the debt. He explained that Delaney Creek Park Manager Jerome Losson has been turning most of their profits over to the County council to help pay towards the debt - supposedly at the council's insistence. Worley said they were essentially losing hard earned money and have not been able to properly fund basic operations, such as maintenance, because of this.

Councilman Mark Manship said that a miscommunication must have occurred somewhere down the line to Losson, because the council has never hassled departments to hand over money to help pay off the debt. "As long as the state stays off our backs, we'll stay off the departments....everyone knows the debt is there," he said.

Disputes aside, Worley shared Manship's view that the issue at hand was figuring out how to look past their disagreements and work together for the good of the county. "We all have a central goal of getting rid of that debt."