The proposed renovation project of the Washington County Detention Center took another step forward last week when a public hearing was held during the county commissioner's meeting on Dec. 4.

Lisa Lee, who is the county's Bond Counsel with Ice Miller Law Firm in Indianapolis, led the public hearing and presented a resolution that the commissioners unanimously approved.

The resolution established a building corporation consisting of Commissioner John Mishler, County Councilman Randall Bills and Washington County Sheriff Claude Combs. The building corporation will sign the bond documents at the proper time.

The resolution also approved the articles of incorporation.

The other purpose of the hearing was to give members of the public an opportunity to ask questions.

Only one patron, Rhonda Greene, put her name on the list. She had several questions for Lee.

First, Greene wanted to know how long the bonds would last. Lee said 20 years would be the maximum the bond issue could go, but said it could even be less if the bids come in lower..

Green also asked if the project was going to be funded totally by bond issue? Lee said the bond issue will be the sole revenue source and it will be generated from a new property tax levy.

Lee said the new levy is limited by the property tax circuit breaker.

Lee also said more of the financial impact to local taxpayers will be discussed at the next public hearing, which will be on Jan. 22 at 10 a.m.

The need for the project is due to the over-crowding in the current facility, which was explained by County Commissioner President Dave Brown at the Dec. 4 meeting.

"Washington County is going to have to come up with a jail," he said. "We don't have any choice. There has already been contact with a judge. If you take a look at our jail and I think the only reason why we are not under the gun to start moving prisoners (to other facilities) already is because we are taking action. There is action being done by the county."

The WCDC is designed to house 54 inmates, according to Combs. As of Dec. 6, 84 inmates were being housed. Combs said it's rare for the numbers to dip below 90, but they recently had six sent out to the Indiana Department of Corrections.

"It only takes one phone call from a judge and we have to relocate prisoners to other jails," Brown said.

Brown said it would cost the county in the neighborhood of $55 a day to house inmates in another county's facility.

That $55 multiplied by the 40 inmates or more they are over-filled would run a daily tab of around $2,500.

That amount doesn't include man hours, fuel and wear-and-tear on county vehicles to pick those inmates up and return them to this county for court appearances and doctors appointments.

"That's why the jail is a necessity," Brown said. "It'd be wonderful if our jail wasn't

over-crowded. Even the state is looking at other ways to house their prison population. It's going to have to happen."

Brown said the main goal of elected officials is to renovate the local jail with a minimum burden on the local taxpayers.

"Our responsibility as commissioners is to get this facility built without it being a monumental tax burden on the people of Washington County," he said. "That's what we are trying to do. We are looking at bond issue, at grants, any type of avenue we can to ease the tax burden on the people of the county. In my opinion the number one topic of the whole thing is the tax burden on the people."

Mishler represents the commissioners on the committee that was formed to work with the architects, engineers, county sheriff, judges and all the people involved in the project. He updated those in attendance on where the project is as of the Dec. 4 meeting.

Mishler said at the meeting the group discussed the invoices received from the design firm RQAW in the amount of $42,000 for work that has already been done..

The commissioners verbally agreed to pay that fee out of the county's Cum Jail Fund and then once the bonds are issued that fund can be reimbursed.

As for other things discussed at the planning committee, Les Smith with Shireman said most were logistical needs.

"We went over the design issues as far as what the sheriff wants as far as movement and getting good flow through the jail," he said. "We've been going through and reviewing those things and making sure that everyone is in-line to where it's going to work and to get us the best bang for the buck to build the building and get the most useful facility that we can.

"The meetings were very productive and we are not finished by any means, but we are getting to a point where RQAW is going to start putting some things on paper for us with our revisions. Then we will look at it again to make any final tweaks on the drawings. Once that is done, they will be presented to the commissioners for approval."

Smith said the group will continue to look at budgets, construct-ability and schedules.

The number one priority with the jail renovation is added space to house inmates.

To make sure that need gets met, the project is bring set up with different bid packages.

Smith said there is the base bid, which includes the housing unit – which will include 204 beds.

"We get what we have to have there," Smith said. "That's what the county has to have and then there is some other stuff that if it comes in within the budget, like work on the lobby, additional site work on the parking lot and some things of that nature we will be able to get done."

Les said they are listed in priority from largest need to smallest.

If things continue to move forward ground will be broke in 2013.