

First step in proposed jail funding

Written by George Browning
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The council approved a resolution from the Jail Expansion Committee that was basically the first step in getting the funding according to County Council Attorney Mark Clark.

The resolution included a petition that was signed by 95 tax payers in Washington County and also included the fact that there is a need for the project.

The resolution also includes a statement about the needs of funding above what the county currently has on hand.

The resolution also approves leasing of the property while the project is going on.

"This project is slated to be funded through tax dollars and/or grant dollars," Clark said. "It's the next step in the funding phase."

Jack Mahuron asked how long it will take before bond issues.

Councilman John Revels said the total time of the project would be a year and a half before the jail is up and running.

Council President David Hoar asked if there has been any cost analysis about what it's going to cost taxpayers.

Auditor Sarah Bachman said that information should be given at a public hearing which is scheduled to take place at 10 a.m. as part of the county commissioner's meeting that day.

Councilman Ben Bowling made a motion to approve the resolution and Revels seconded it, which opened it for discussion.

"I know this is going to be controversial," Hoar said. "It's not going to be popular but the jail is full.

Revels said he worked in a county where nothing was done to address overcrowding in the 1980s and said the cost for not acting was huge for the county.

"The prisoners will be stored and if we can't store them we will have to pay to have them stored some place else," Hoar said. "That's more costly then doing the construction."

Gerald Fleming asked a question that was as much a statement, "So the bottom line is taxpayers are going to have bear the brunt?"

Currently the Washington County Jail has nearly double the inmates it was housed to hold.

Should a judge order inmates be moved, it could cost the county at minimum \$50 for each one moved.

Hoar cautioned the council on the fact that some counties have built large facilities expecting to house inmates for the Indiana Department of Corrections.

He said Elkhart County built a 950 bed facility and for two years housed prisoners for the IDOC.

Then last fall, the state opened a moth-ball prison and took 250 inmates out and put them into a that facility.

"Losing those inmates impacted their budget by 2.7 million dollars," Hoar said.

Revels said while housing inmates for the IDOC has been discussed, it's not something the county will rely on to meet the funding of the renovated facility.

"Housing DOC inmates is not part of our equation," he said.

Bowling agreed, saying, "It's a bonus if we get to house IDOC inmates."

Councilman Randall Bills said it's unfortunate that there is a need, but he understands the county's hands are tied.

"What it comes down to is are going to pay a lot of money if a lawsuit or federal order were to come against us, or are we going to fulfill the needs that need to be met in order to house

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prisoners," Bills said.

Revels said if it gets to that point, the county will have little say in the project.

"They will tell you what to do, how to do it and when to do it," he said. "That will end up costing us three or four or five times as much."

The council approved the resolution unanimously.

The group's next meeting will be on February 4,