

Commissioners discuss railroad closure, Pumpkin Ridge Road plan

Officials also OK bid to replace HVAC system, clear mold at health department

By COURTNEY HUGHETT
For the Brown County Democrat

The Brown County Commissioners covered a full slate of issues at their meeting Wednesday afternoon, May 7, ranging from approving building maintenance and reviewing job descriptions to debating a proposed road upgrade by the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) that has raised questions about local impact and property owner awareness.

Commissioners approved HVAC replacements to the health department building, awarding the lowest bid to Reliable Comfort for \$25,041.02. Also, mold has been found in the building and the commissioners received one bid from Servpro of Columbus for \$14,478.80 to resolve the issue, which they also approved. Combined, the project will cost \$39,519.82, fully funded from the health department's budget. The other HVAC bids were from Harrell-Fish for \$32,250 and Dugan Air for \$27,586. Servpro was the only bid for the mold remediation.

The HVAC work includes removing and replacing two aging systems, cleaning duct lines, and reworking the filter and humidification system. The mold cleanup will include vacuuming, surface cleaning, air scrubbing, and carpet cleaning and deodorizing.

The commissioners also reviewed bids for sealcoating parking lots at several county properties. The bids were from Ed Couch Sealcoating, \$26,050; Smith Paving, \$32,485; and Hardin Paving, \$35,528. The parking lots include the veterans' affair/parks and recreation, the government annex building, prosecutor's office, health department, solid waste/highway department and the sheriff's department.

The commissioners approved Ed Couch Sealcoating for \$26,050 but decided to hold off on doing the prosecutor's lot since they may be relocating and waiting on the sheriff's department until the HVAC work is complete. Additional paving work may be put out for bid in the future at the EMT and sheriff's department.

An ordinance to update the county employee job descriptions—a key step before restructuring the county's salary system—was approved. It was noted that the job descriptions are a part of the ordinance but not carved in stone as some amendments have already been discussed. The county council is responsible for making the salary changes now that the job descriptions are approved. Commissioner Ron Sanders voted against the measure, though he did not elaborate on his objections.

Commissioners formally began talks with the Town of Nashville about a potential building swap. No details were provided, but Commissioner Kevin Patrick was appointed to represent the county in the discussion. A public notice will be issued once negotiations advance.

The Brown County Pickleball Club brought forward a preliminary proposal to build six public courts on county-owned land. The courts would be open to all residents but reserved for club use five nights per week, with two tournaments per year. The Memorandum of Understanding hasn't been shown to the pickleball club

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**Ron Sanders,
Brown County commissioner**
On a proposed INDOT project to upgrade Pumpkin Ridge Road.

yet and is just in the preliminary stages.

Commissioners renewed a five-year agreement with the Solid Waste District to continue splitting costs for shared space in the recycling building with the highway department. A new clause in the renewal allows either party to exit the agreement with written notice. Commissioner Sanders voted against the agreement, without explanation. He also raised concerns about trash being stored inside the building, calling it hazardous. Commissioner Patrick said the district director is working on a solution to that issue.

A proposed \$6.5 million INDOT project to upgrade Pumpkin Ridge Road, that runs between Hoover Road and Mountain Tea State Forest, into a two-lane paved road was tabled after Commissioners Sanders and Tim Clark raised concerns about the project's impact on local homeowners, some of whom may be unaware of potential eminent domain action.

"This work may affect the peace of the residents who moved out there for a reason," said Commissioner Sanders.

Though Commissioner Patrick voted against tabling the matter, the majority agreed to delay approval until more public input could be gathered. INDOT must hold public hearings, but it was noted that once commissioners approve the project, control shifts to the state, limiting county input. Commissioners Sanders and Clark were not comfortable with this.

The commissioners approved a \$877,444 bid from RL Vuckson Excavating of Scottsburg to replace Bridge 111 on Country Club Road through the Community Crossings grant program.

Highway Superintendent Arec Burton informed the commissioners that the Community Crossings grant can only be applied for one time a year in 2026 and they are not yet sure if the maximum amount will stay at \$1.5 million since there will be a lot more competition. The second call for applications for 2025 has also been cancelled.

The commissioners approved sending a letter to the state regarding the railroad crossing closure on Indian Hill Road. The crossing has been closed since 2020 and was done so without any public input. INDOT is requiring \$1.9 million in upgrades to be made to reopen the crossing and the county's attempt to get a federal grant for help was denied. They were told other potential federal grants are not guaranteed due to changes in the current administration. The letter to the state requested reconsideration of the upgrades needed citing public safety issues with emergency personnel getting through and the closure has split the Tecumseh Trail into two parts causing tourism is being affected. There is also a loss of access to the state

highway. The commissioners noted in the letter that there have been no safety issues at the crossing in the past, and it is a low-traveled gravel road. Commissioner Clark said they will now wait to hear back from the state.

The commissioners approved Thomas Endicott to fill a vacancy on the Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals.

Theresa Cobain, commissioners' administrative assistant, reported that there are currently two job openings in the county — a driver/loader position in the highway department and a payroll position in the auditor's office.

She also informed the commissioners that a new form has been created for courthouse lawn use. It will be put on the county website. Commissioner Clark explained that they discovered the county didn't have a process in place for people to request to use the courthouse lawn and this form allows for liability protection. Commissioner Sanders said he hasn't seen the form and wanted to know if the users would be required to have insurance. Commissioner Patrick said there is a clause that states the county is not liable for any accidents and they worked with the insurance company for that language on the form. Audience members had various questions including how this would apply to public protests and if there were a way the county could charge groups if any issues such as a mass casualty were to happen to which the commissioners replied that they look at each request to use the law and that the agreement would prevent the county from being responsible of any casualties or accidents.

Duane Parsons, with the Alcoholic Beverage Board, reported that Hob Nob and Nashville House were approved for permits at their last meeting. Cooper's Alley lost their license due to a major violation and missed the three subsequent required hearings.

Commissioner Clark explained that an ordinance has been included in the general obligation bond requiring a construction manager to be hired to oversee projects. This was a request of the county council in collaboration with the commissioners. Clark said they have been talking to some service providers to provide this service but also want to incorporate an asset management plan, which has been needed, and the capital improvement plan. He said more information will be forthcoming.

Redistricting is underway for council districts, aiming to correct an imbalance of the number of residents per precinct. Dave Shelton, the Knox County Clerk, is assisting the county to get the redistricting done. There will be more information and public meetings in the future.

Commissioner Clark reported that the finance committee is forecasting a \$700,000 budget shortfall in 2025, increasing to \$900,000 in 2026 before balancing in 2027. This is due to budget changes at the state level taking money away from property taxes. The next finance committee meeting is May 16 at 9 a.m. Commissioner Clark said he will keep the public informed of what transpires.

The commissioners' next meeting is Wednesday, May 21 at 6 p.m.