

## **Shouting, accusations, and a split vote**

### **Commissioners advance Pumpkin Ridge Road project**

**By Courtney H** ughett Brown County Democrat

The Brown County Commissioners' meeting on Feb.

18 began like many others, with the Pledge of Allegiance and routine business. It did not stay that way.

By the time the board voted 2-1 on an agreement with INDOT to move forward with engineering and design work for improvements to Pumpkin Ridge Road leading to Mt. Tea State Forest, the meeting had devolved into shouting from the audience, accusations of corruption and tyranny, and allegations of conflicts of interest.

The debate centered on whether the county should enter into an agreement with INDOT that would begin the next phase of a statefunded project to upgrade Pumpkin Ridge Road, an unmaintained county road that provides access to Mt.

Tea State Forest. Commissioner Tim Clark opened the discussion by summarizing the history of the project, stating that Mt. Tea was deeded to the state in 2013 and dedicated in 2020, and the county has responsibility for maintaining access.

He explained that because of the condition of the road and the terrain, the project would be too expensive for the county to fund on its own. DNR and previous Brown County Commissioners requested and received state funding.

INDOT, he said, modified the initial concept to a minimum standard they would approve and fund. He said the county would only need land necessary to accommodate the road improvements and temporary construction easements.

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He emphasized that the issue has been on the commissioners' agenda for months, that there had been a site walkthrough with property owners, and that adjustments had been made to earlier plans.

That explanation did little to calm the room.

Bob Klee, who said he and his wife have owned property near Pumpkin Ridge Road since 2001, told commissioners he has attended meetings regularly since late summer. "To my knowledge, not a single property owner on Pumpkin Ridge Road is supportive of this project," Klee said.

Klee referenced an online petition opposing the widening project, stating that 309 people had signed it as of that morning. He said most signers were local residents. "You've got people in the community that are saying leave Pumpkin Ridge Road the way it is," he said.

Klee displayed a photo showing his home and nearby staked construction boundaries and said the road would be pushed dangerously close to his house. He also raised concerns about his septic system crossing beneath the road and potential disruption.

He went further, alleging that Commissioner Kevin Patrick had a conflict of interest due to his family's logging business. "I think some of us are speculating the reason you want to have a superhighway is to get those logging

trucks and heavy equipment in and out of there,” Klee said.

Barbara Nix argued that the agreement amounted to signing a “blind contract” and warned about eminent domain. “Harm one, the use of eminent domain to steal land from the homeowners,” she said. “Harm two, they will not get just compensation. Harm three, the land that they get to keep will lose value.”

She criticized the order of operations, saying studies should come before signing. “This is back ass words,” Nix said.

Chris Tuttle, speaking as a property owner and member of the Brown County People’s Assembly, said neighbors have maintained the road for years. “For over a decade, we have maintained the road ourselves,” Tuttle said. “We cut the trees, we hauled gravel, we grade the facilities.”

He warned that a \$6-8 million project could take significant acreage from neighbors under the threat of eminent domain. “Eminent domain is supposed to exist for true public necessity,” Tuttle said. “It is not supposed to be a weapon.”

Several speakers raised environmental concerns, referencing endangered species and erosion issues. Others questioned whether there was even a demonstrated need for widening the road, saying traffic to Mt. Tea is minimal.

Jason Dickmeyer criticized the agreement language and the lack of specific construction limits. He also pointed to Section 14 of the agreement. “Section 14 gives up all power to INDOT,” Dickmeyer said. “If you sign this, it’s over.”

John Mueller said commissioners had not clearly explained why they supported the project. “We haven’t heard justification in your minds for this vote,” Mueller said. He described the proposal as fiscally irresponsible and unnecessary. He pressed the commissioners for their reasoning for being in favor of the project. Commissioner Clark said he is for the project to provide a safe, two-lane road for taxpayers to get access to the state forest.

Rich Stanley urged the board to investigate a minimal county-led option, suggesting modest improvements such as pull-offs and gravel work rather than a full redesign. “If it would take \$50,000 to fix this whole issue, why are you considering spending six million dollars?” Stanley asked.

Commissioner Ron Sanders echoed many of the audience members’ concerns. He questioned the scope of

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the agreement, potential litigation exposure and long-term maintenance costs. “There’s no way in hell I’m signing it,” Sanders said at one point while making a motion to deny the agreement. That motion failed for lack of a second.

Sanders later proposed investigating alternative improvements before committing to the INDOT agreement. That motion also failed.

Clark defended the process, saying the plan had already been scaled back from earlier, larger concepts. He said after public outcry, they met with property owners and worked with INDOT to scale back the original plans. “We listened. They adjusted,” he said.

He said the current design reflected an 18-foot roadway with two-foot shoulders and that further refinements could be made during the engineering phase. “The standard within the state is two-lane road for taxpayers and stakeholders to get back to the state forest,” Clark said.

He argued that signing the agreement was necessary to begin engineering studies and evaluate options such as Salt Creek access. “Studies cost money, and the agreement leads to starting the study,” Clark said. “We ran this

through attorneys two or three times. We're comfortable with this." Commissioner Patrick nodded in agreement.

As the discussion intensified, residents interrupted repeatedly and shouted over Commissioner Clark, expressing their frustration with him as an elected official who was supposed to be representing his constituents. At one point, Clark responded to accusations that commissioners were not listening. "I don't know what I could possibly say or do that would change anybody's mind," Clark said.

During the heated exchange, Commissioner Sanders directed a remark to the other commissioners, agreeing, he said, with something shouted from the audience, saying, "I've come to believe you may be evil." This brought cheers from the audience.

When Patrick made a motion to proceed forward with the INDOT contract for Pumpkin Ridge Road's modifications, Clark seconded.

During roll call, Sanders voted, "Hell no." Clark and Patrick voted yes.

Clark said, "Folks, I was pretty clear when I ran. I said accountability, transparency, and improvement. This project's been transparent."

Immediately after the vote, as the audience was exiting the room, shouting continued with residents calling for the two commissioners to be impeached, to resign or be voted out.

Later, as the board attempted to move on to other business, Auditor Julia Reeves said to Commissioner Sanders that she was "very offended by how you acted in this meeting."

Sanders replied, "You've been offended before," and the auditor replied, "Oh, a lot with you, yes".

Sanders then added, "Yeah, I've been offended with how you do books." The auditor responded and said, "Oh, I bet you have," before Commissioner Clark interrupted and moved on with the meeting.

The approved agreement for Pumpkin Ridge Road now allows the project to move into the engineering phase under INDOT oversight. Further design work and public involvement are expected as the process continues.