

Long-debated Mt. Tea road plan remains unsettled, no vote yet

By Courtney H ughett Brown County Democrat

The Brown County Commissioners spent a large portion of their Feb. 4 meeting focused on the proposed road upgrade to access Mt. Tea State Forest, a project that continues to draw strong public opposition, questions about cost, and concerns over property impacts and longterm maintenance for the county. Commissioners reviewed the current status of the proposed upgrade to Pumpkin Ridge Road, which is the primary access route to the Mt. Tea State Forest property. The road is currently unmaintained by the county and does not meet modern access standards. Commissioner Tim Clark explained that the goal of the project is to provide safe, two-lane gravel access to the forest, but emphasized that the existing roadbed, steep terrain, drainage problems and lack of infrastructure make improvements extremely expensive.

He explained that the initial concept for the project was estimated at about \$6.5 million.

That estimate included building a proper roadbed, installing culverts, managing water flow, and addressing steep slopes.

After objections from residents, the design was revised. The road

width was reduced from 22 feet to 18 feet and the construction footprint was narrowed, but even with those changes, the project remains costly. A preliminary engineering report, estimated at about \$1.2 million, is still required before final construction costs can be determined.

Clark said the funding for the project would come from state sources, requested by the Department of Natural Resources and approved through the Indiana Department of Transportation.

He stressed that while state money would cover construction, the county would ultimately be responsible for long-term maintenance, which remains a major concern.

An on-site walk of Pumpkin Ridge Road was held in late January with county officials, INDOT representatives, DNR staff and property owners in attendance. Commissioner Clark said the visit helped highlight concerns about topography, drainage, soil stability, and how much private land could be

affected during construction. They also said INDOT agreed to request design deviations from its standard specifications in order to reduce impacts.

Property owners and residents living near Pumpkin Ridge Road used much of the public comment period to voice opposition to the proposed road upgrades.

Bob Klee, a property owner whose land borders Pumpkin Ridge Road, said he found the recent on-site meeting productive but remains deeply concerned about how much private property could be taken.

Klee said the proposed construction limits could extend as much as 70 feet into his property, bringing construction close to his home and outbuildings. He explained that his septic system currently runs under Pumpkin Ridge Road and into a neighboring property, and while project managers told him the system would not need to be addressed immediately, he remains worried about how and when it would be replaced. Klee said one possible solution discussed during the site visit was the use of a temporary road during construction, rather than permanently taking large sections of private land.

He also suggested alternatives such as retaining walls or berms with tree plantings to reduce visual and noise impacts once construction is complete.

Klee also referenced an online petition opposing the project, saying it had gathered 251 signatures as of the day before the meeting. He said many of the comments left by petition signers objected to spending millions of dollars on the project, taking private land, and altering what they see as a road that already functions adequately for the limited traffic it serves.

Charlie Shaw, a longtime Brown County resident and precinct committeeman, said he was worried the project would destroy what he described as “the essence of Brown County.” He compared the proposal to work done on Yellowwood Road in the past, which he said turned a scenic gravel road into what he described as a “super highway gravel road.” Shaw said he has hunted and spent time in the Mt. Tea area for decades and has never had trouble accessing it using the existing road. He said he does not want to see Pumpkin Ridge Road widened or altered in a way that permanently changes the landscape.

Richard Stanley questioned the overall value of the project, saying he could not justify spending more than \$6 million on a road that serves a small and rarely used forest.

Stanley said, “I don’t believe in wasting money, regardless of where that money is coming from.”

He argued that the value created by the project would be minimal and urged the commissioners to seriously consider alternatives, including a county-led improvement or doing nothing at all. Stanley said the “do nothing” option would save millions of dollars and should be viewed as a fiscally conservative choice. He also criticized what he saw as a process that compared only different versions of the INDOT proposal rather than fully evaluating other approaches.

Greg DeLong criticized how the project has been described publicly, saying it was misleading to focus on an 18-foot road width when the actual construction footprint could exceed 100 feet in some areas. He also questioned why access from Salt Creek Road, which would remain entirely on state-owned land, has not been seriously pursued, even if that option would require a bridge or footbridge. DeLong said not every natural area in Brown County needs direct vehicle access and warned that improving access would likely increase vandalism, dumping, and emergency service calls.

Sherrie Mitchell raised concerns about provisions in the project agreement that give INDOT final approval authority over plans and land acquisition. Mitchell said she was “100 percent opposed” to language she believes relinquishes local control to the state.

Several speakers questioned whether Pumpkin Ridge Road is a public or private road and whether the county or state has the authority to proceed without property owner consent. County

ROAD from page A1 to A6

officials said title research is underway and that ownership and easement questions are still being investigated.

Nashville resident Dena Patrick asked who took care of plowing Pumpkin Ridge after the recent winter storm. Several in the audience said local property owners, not the county, plowed the road using their own equipment, which they said demonstrated that the road can function without major reconstruction.

Commissioner Clark said no final decisions have been made on the Mt. Tea project and emphasized that additional legal review, engineering studies, and agreements would be required before anything could move forward.

In other business, commissioners took action on a list of board and commission appointments.

For the county's Alcohol and Beverage Commission, commissioners voted to keep Ross Benson in his position, citing his experience and familiarity with the complex regulatory process.

Appointments to the Convention & Visitors Commission generated extended discussion.

Commissioners reviewed applications from multiple candidates and ultimately voted to appoint Richard Stanley to one of the CVC seats. They also voted to re-advertise the second position, specifically seeking someone engaged in the hotel or lodging business, as required by statute.

After further discussion, the commissioners' attorney clarified that only two county-appointed members may serve on the CVC and voted to remove Andy Szakaly to remain in compliance with the law.

For the Helmsburg Regional Service District, commissioners reappointed Kyle Meyers, noting he was the only applicant and has been serving in the role.

Commissioners also reappointed Tom Williams, William Callahan, and Michael O'Neil to the Hamblen Township Fire District Board after confirming that all three wished to continue serving.

The Area Plan Commission was ordered to be re-advertised after commissioners determined the position had not been properly advertised.

For the Board of Zoning Appeals, commissioners appointed Michael Harrison after he addressed the board and explained his background in large-scale commercial construction, project management, and engineering coordination.

For the Redevelopment Commission, commissioners agreed to pause active work due to a lack of a clear mission for the board. They voted to retain Chris Schneider and Alyn Brown, and approved Tim Clark to fill the third seat to maintain the minimum number of members required by law.

The commissioners also voted to appoint Corey Frost as the county's permanent Emergency Management Agency director. Frost has been serving as interim director and was recommended by the Emergency Management Advisory Council. Commissioners praised his leadership during the recent winter storm and a gas main rupture that required evacuations and full activation of the county's Emergency Operations Center.

During a separate Board of Finance meeting held within the commissioners meeting, officials reviewed the county's investment policy and reported that Brown County earned \$1,174,021.73 in interest income in 2025, an increase over the previous year.

Highway Department updates included notice of upcoming bridge work, including a deck replacement project on Hoover Road expected to begin in mid-March and finish by late June, which will require a road closure.

Commissioner Kevin Patrick said the closure dates will be publicized once they are known.