

Council approves \$50K for election lawsuit legal bills

By Courtney H ughett Brown County Democrat

The Brown County Council voted Monday night, July 20, to approve another \$50,000 for legal expenses tied to an ongoing Election Board lawsuit involving Richard Stanley and Commissioner Tim Clark.

The money will go to Brown County Clerk Pearletta Banks to cover Election Board legal fees. Banks had made the request at the council's July 9 work session, saying the Election Board had already used the money budgeted for legal costs and was over budget.

At Monday's meeting, Banks said there was one update since the work session. Legal counsel and the two attorneys who sit on the Election Board declined a request from Council member Jim Kemp to attend a special public meeting about the legal fees.

Banks said they declined because the lawsuit is still active and because they did not believe such a meeting was necessary. "In their words, it would be tasteless," Banks said.

The council approved the \$50,000 request unanimously.

The council also continued its discussion about finding a vehicle for the Brown County coroner's office, agreeing to have citizen Duane Parsons continue researching used options up to \$50,000.

Council members, Commissioner Kevin Patrick and Parsons have been discussing possible options with current coroner Mike Moore and incoming coroner Dave Frensemeier. The issue has come up at multiple meetings as officials try to find a vehicle that can safely and respectfully transport bodies without spending more than necessary.

Council members agreed they do not want to spend \$70,000 to \$100,000 on a new vehicle if a used option will meet the need. The council voted to ask Parsons to keep looking at used vehicles and report back.

Members said the vote did not authorize buying a vehicle but gave Parsons a price range to use during his search.

Council members discussed several possibilities, including hearses, vans, pickup trucks, Suburbans and Durangos. Some members said the vehicle needs to handle difficult situations, including remote locations, decomposition and cases involving fluids. Others said the county should also be realistic about the number of calls, noting that the coroner handles about 24 to 30 body recoveries a year on average.

The council also approved an ordinance that sets county policy on stipends. The ordinance says stipends that are not required or allowed by state law will be discontinued, but it allows the council to approve certain incentives and allowances for employees at the Brown County Law Enforcement Center. Those may include field training officer incentives, DataMaster certification incentives, uniform allowances or physical fitness allowances, if identified by the sheriff and approved through the annual budget. The ordinance passed on second reading.

Council members also heard from Ody Ekwonwa, the new Purdue Extension regional operations leader. Ekwonwa said Purdue Extension is restructuring into a regional model.

Under that model, Brown County will still have local 4-H staff, but other educators will serve multiple counties instead of being stationed full-time in one county.

Ekwonwa said regional operations leaders will take on more administrative work so educators can focus on programming and serving communities. She also gave council members a brief report on the county fair and thanked the council for its continued support.

Council member Scott Rudd asked whether the restructuring would change Purdue Extension's budget request.

Ekwonwa said the request will increase, but the larger amount will include costs that were previously listed separately, such as mileage, professional development and program supplies.

She said she will provide more details during budget hearings.

The council also discussed employee overtime, vacation payouts and the possibility of using a better human resources or timekeeping system.

Council member Judy Swift Powdrill said the Personnel Advisory Committee has been discussing overtime and problems that can occur when employees leave county jobs with large amounts of overtime or vacation time still owed. Swift Powdrill said those payouts can hurt department budgets after an employee leaves. "I do not feel that it should be coming out of the county coffers because department heads are not enforcing policy and making their people use it and keeping it low," Swift Powdrill said.

She said department heads should make employees use overtime or keep it within limits, instead of allowing large balances to build up and then expecting the county to pay them out when someone leaves.

Swift Powdrill said the council may need to take a clear position that departments cannot hire replacement employees until their budgets are back in balance if unused time has to be paid out.

Council members also discussed software systems that could help track time sheets, overtime, leave, benefits and payroll. Swift Powdrill said the county has looked at several companies but also learned that the county's existing LOW financial software may already be able to do more than the county is using. She suggested having LOW give a presentation to the Personnel Advisory Committee before the county considers buying another system.

The council also agreed to advertise for someone to fill a vacant Parks and Recreation Board seat after the death of John Kinnard. The appointment would fill the remainder of the term through the end of the year. Council members said the vacancy should be advertised in the newspaper and on the county website, with applications due to the auditor's office by Aug. 5 or until filled.

The council plans to discuss the appointment at its Aug. 6 work session.

Near the end of the meeting, council members received updates on tourism-related expenses and possible new funding sources.

Council member Scott Rudd said he and Swift Powdrill had met with Convention and Visitors Commission President Kevin Ault, the Parks and Recreation director and the parks office manager about Parks and Recreation expenses that may be tied to tourism.

The goal is to see whether some expenses now paid through regular county tax dollars could instead be paid with innkeepers' tax money, freeing county money for essential services such as public safety and ambulance service.

Council members are also planning to meet with the Historical Society about maintenance needs at Pioneer Village, which is county-owned property. The Fair Board has also been part of similar conversations.

The council also heard that a study grant has been applied for to look at creating a regional economic development district. A \$3,000 contribution from innkeepers' tax money has been made toward the effort, and ROI, the county's regional partner, is handling the grant paperwork.

Council member Rudd said that type of district could eventually open the door to funding for sewer projects in places such as Helmsburg and Bean Blossom. He said most Indiana counties already have access to those funds,

while Brown County does not. “At the end of that study, we can say no thanks. We can say wonderful,” he said. “The county can kind of decide where it wants to go from there.”
