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Sheriff's HQ gets top priority

County says inmate housing separate project

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Construction projects for the Allen County Sheriff's Department and Community Corrections that, for a short time, were joined have now been separated.

After pleas from several county officials, the commissioners are moving ahead with moving sheriff's staff into new headquarters. But they will also continue to work with Judge John Surbeck and Community Corrections to find a place to house state prisoners when they return to Allen County to participate in Re-Entry Court.

Commissioner Nelson Peters said Friday that the plan now is to focus on providing a new headquarters for sheriff's department staff so they can leave the dilapidated Kidder Building, part of the county's north campus at Lima and Carroll roads. The county bought a former bank building on New Haven Avenue in 2006 to serve as a new home for the staff but substantial renovations are needed.

For several months, the headquarters project was contingent on Community Corrections moving out of its building downtown and into a new building that would also house Re-Entry Court participants, work-release participants and, possibly, probation staff.

Money set aside to rehabilitate the New Haven Avenue building could have been put toward the housing project. The bank building also could have been sold to contribute more money for the project.

"We all agreed for all the right reasons to try to accommodate both projects," said Surbeck, who oversees Re-Entry Court. "Each project was dragging the other down."

Surbeck and Sheila Hudson, director of Community Corrections, met with the commissioners Friday to clear up misunderstandings regarding the fate of the housing project, he said.

Concerns were growing about how to pay for the project, which Peters said could cost up to \$15 million. The county could scrape together about half of that, but Peters isn't sure whether the county would want to issue a bond for the remainder, he said.

Money that county officials hoped the state Department of Correction would contribute to the project isn't there, Commissioner Linda Bloom said Friday.

While the commissioners continue to have reservations about how to pay for the building and its location, they are willing to keep working on the project with Hudson and Surbeck, Peters said.

Both Peters and Hudson said the group will now meet regularly to talk about the housing project, alternative funding options and other possible locations.

The proposed location was across from the jail on South Calhoun Street and next to Headwaters Park West, sparking concerns about safety and the effect on downtown development because convicted felons would be living there.

The money set aside for the headquarters project can remain attached to the sheriff's project, Peters said.

"We're at a point now," Peters said, "we've got to move ahead on the sheriff's (building)."

But Peters said the commissioners will look at other properties that could house the sheriff's staff. They will also try again to buy the property adjacent to the bank building at New Haven Avenue and Meyer Road.

Sheriff Ken Fries was pleased to hear Peters is ready to move ahead.

Fries wants to start Monday by reviewing architectural drawings that the commissioners have already had prepared, he said. But he's worried that looking at other properties could delay a project that his predecessor, Jim Herman, started in 2004.

"We could continually look at new buildings and never get anything to move forward," Fries said, adding that officials should not let other possible sites distract them.

His goal is not to let his detectives, records staff and training officers spend another winter inside the Kidder Building because of the expense of maintaining the building and the poor working conditions.

Last week his staff worked without heat for two days because of ongoing problems with the old furnace and piping. Workers used electric heaters to keep warm, Fries said.

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