

News~Sentinel

BREAKING NEWS

Deputy Fort Wayne police chief in 'road rage' incident demoted

KEVIN LEININGER: Sale of Allen County's prime 135 acres begins with health center's move, but won't end there



The Byron Health Center, 12101 Lima Road, plans to relocate to Lake Avenue and Beacon Street, clearing the way for the county to sell the property. (File photo by Kevin Leininger of The News-Sentinel)

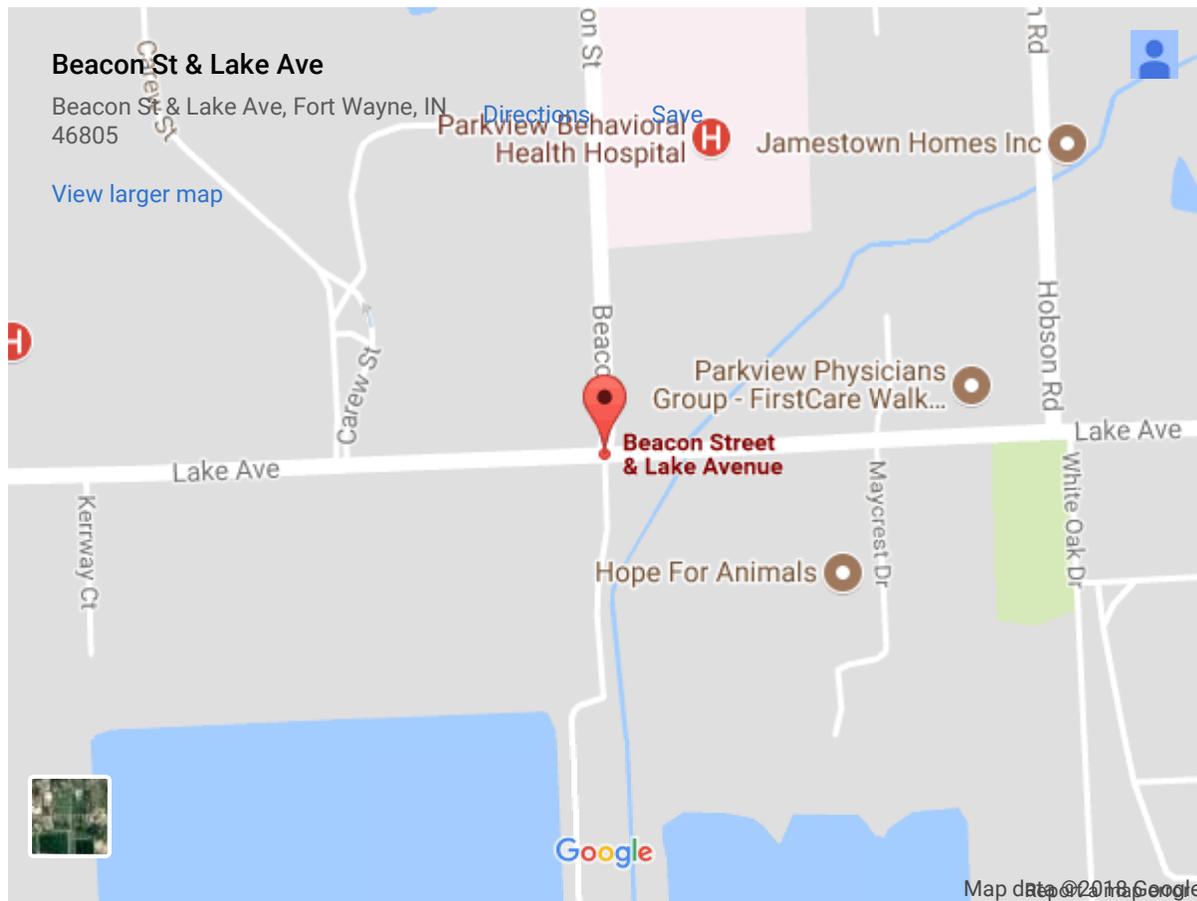


How much would someone pay for 135 acres of prime real estate along a major corridor on the city's bustling north side?

After years of talk but little action, Allen County officials may soon find out thanks to the planned relocation of the Byron Health Center to Lake Avenue — a move that could start a chain reaction affecting everything from criminal justice to endangered youths to riverfront development.

The first domino, in fact, has already fallen. Byron, currently located in an aging county-owned building at 12101 Lima Road, has purchased about 16 acres at Lake and Beacon Street from Crossroad Child & Family Services and plans to build a new facility there, according to Byron board member and County Commissioner Therese Brown. Parkview Health, which operates its original hospital campus on nearby Randallia Drive, has also purchased nine acres from Crossroad but has no immediate plans for the land, spokesman Jessica Miller said.

Although many details of Byron's relocation plan are uncertain, its acquisition of property is crucial because it will allow the county to actively explore the sale of its 100-acre site along Lima north of Carroll Road — something officials have discussed since at least 2009. The county owns another 35 acres along Lima south of Carroll, and that property could also be included in a development plan being crafted by local real estate agent Barry Sturges. A possible sale price has not been determined, but Peters said the location could be attractive for residential or commercial use or as an office-technology park.



In other words, a sale could generate millions of dollars for county coffers. That's good, because although Byron is operated by Recovery Health Systems and would pay for most or all of its new campus, a sale could force the county to relocate its facilities that share the property with Byron — something that would also cost a lot of money.

The Sheriff Department's work release program is in former Allen County Home facilities north of Carroll, but those could be relocated to the former state juvenile jail at 7117 Venture Lane the county bought in 2016 for \$1.3 million. But it could cost \$5 million to make the facility usable for that purpose, Peters said. The Lima Road site is also home to a warehouse other county departments use for storage, which would have to be replaced. The county's adjacent north Highway Department garage could be included as well. South of Carroll Road, meanwhile, is the county's Youth Services Center, an emergency shelter for children and young adults.

The imminent game of bureaucratic musical chairs could also include the county's Community Corrections operation, which provides a variety of programs for offenders at 201 W. Superior St. in the heart of the city's riverfront development target area. *"They want us off Superior,"* Peters said, adding that the current offer for the property is about \$2.8 million — about \$1 million less than the facility would cost to replace.

The development plan will help determine whether any of the existing structures remain, although Peters suggests a cleared site would be more attractive to potential developers. One thing probably will stay, however: a small graveyard containing the remains of about 50 former residents of the County Home or the Byron Sanitarium, a tuberculosis-treatment facility that also operated there from 1919 to 1976.

Sale of the Lima Road and Superior street properties could pay for new or renovated facilities. New locations remain unclear, but Peters noted the county already owns 120 acres along Adams Center Road that is home to the Sheriff's shooting range and the proposed site of a police canine training facility.

That's a lot of movable parts, but the move by Byron will light the fuse that will almost certainly make at least some of it happen. For Byron, which has a current capacity of about 500 patients but a census closer to 125, the move is overdue. Just last year, for example, Byron officials planned to relocate to the former YWCA campus on Wells Street before concluding it was not a good fit.

"We need a new building. We can't even get parts (for some of what we need)," CEO Deb Lambert said at the time. About 97 percent of Byron's residents are covered by Medicaid, which primarily serves low-income Hoosiers.

“(Byron) is getting to be well-known for being willing to take the hard cases. They have a niche, but the goal is to reach the community in a broader way,” Brown said. *“(The move) will make them more visible.”*

And that is likely to be just the beginning.

This column is the commentary of the writer and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of The News-Sentinel. Email Kevin Leininger at kleininger@news-sentinel.com or call him at 461-8355.