

Commission approves pursuing loan option for 'Beulah Building'

BY DANIEL ARENS

The Mercer County Commission opted to move forward with seeking a Bank of North Dakota loan option for the "Beulah Building" near the Highway 200/Highway49 roundabout during a special meeting Nov. 12.

The special meeting, which lasted a little over a half hour and had several items on its docket, was called after the commission's regular Nov. 4 meeting (scheduled as an evening meeting) resulted in there not being quorum of commissioners, other than for a public hearing on properties that went to the county for tax delinquency that was held due to a third commissioner briefly calling in.

Rather than wait until the commission's next regularly-scheduled meeting Nov. 18 for all of the business from the earlier meeting, the commission opted to handle some of the items they saw as more pressing in the special meeting.

Commissioner Jamee Folk, presiding Nov. 12 in the absence of Commission Chairman Rick Bauman, told the other commissioners that Mercer County Building Maintenance Supervisor Jim Albers was hesitant to move forward on his own initiative to pursue financing, despite the commission previously granting Albers its blessing to take care of the expenses he believes are necessary for building repairs following the major storm in June.

The commission discussed the possibility of covering these expenses through the county's building and grounds department and reserves in the building CD fund versus pursuing a loan for the project.

Commissioner Casey Voigt said he favored pursuing the loan as an option, saying filling out the loan application was not a guarantee that the county would get the loan. He said that a 2 percent interest loan might be better financially for the county since the building CD fund generates higher interest.

Voigt added that, while pursuing the application now, he wanted to get more information from Albers and the Mercer County Treasurer's Office of whether there were other building needs the county might have to account for before making a final decision on which avenue to pursue for financing.

Voigt also argued about "false accusations" of the commission approving $1.6 million in spending on the Beulah Building purchase, repairs and remodel, saying the total expenses associated with the building so far were less than $800,000.

Voigt moved to move forward with Arrow Service, the general contractor with the building repair, for pursuing a loan application. Commissioner Steve Guenthner, attending the meeting remotely via phone, seconded, and the motion carried unanimously.



Folk gave an update on the building repairs, describing "phase one" of the project focused on the east side of the building, including where the plan is to house Mercer County Extension, a second ADA bathroom and the shop heaters. Guenthner brought up concerns about prioritizing sealing the exterior walls before insulating, saying he visited the building earlier in the week (last week) and was concerned. The other commissioners agreed to ensure the exterior was properly sealed.

During the special meeting, the commission also discussed the salary for Alice Grinsteinner, who holds the joint Mercer and Oliver counties roles of both emergency manager and human resources director.

Commissioner Gene Wolf said the discussion was not about changing Grinsteinner's actual total salary at all, but shifting what portion of her overall salary goes towards her EM role and what portion towards her HR role. Previously, 70 percent of Grinsteinner's salary was designated for HR and 30 percent for EM, and the commission discussed changing this to be a 50/50 split between the two functions.

Voigt noted that the state provides a match for EM salaries, saying this was why he favored having at least 50 percent of Grinsteinner's salary factored into the EM role. He also pointed out that Mercer County would have to see what the Oliver County Commission decided on this issue, saying it was being brought to them as well.

Voigt moved to approve the shift in percentage for Grinsteinner's salary from 70 percent HR/30 percent EM to 50 percent HR/50 percent EM, stressing there would be no change to the actual dollar amount of her salary. Wolf seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

The commissioners addressed SIRN radios for the Mercer County Highway Department. While SIRN is primarily focused on emergency response departments, the county wanted the highway department to also have access to SIRN radios in case communications were necessary between the road crews and responders.

The commission discussed standard radio units being larger, having more range and being less expensive than handheld portable radios, agreeing to purchase the former for the highway department. They also said that the highway department would not normally have access to the emergency channels for the responders but could be granted access to those channels whenever that access was needed.

Voigt moved to approve purchasing SIRN radios for the Mercer County Highway Department, with a price not to exceed $90,000. Guenthner seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Finally, the commission unanimously approved all bill vouchers during the special meeting as well.