

County commission should find a use for old county jail

THE GOOD NEWS is the county has finished paying off the debt on the \$1.8 million old jail that now sits vacant in Inverness.

The bad news is that the \$1.8 million will probably be turned into a pile of rubble after an upcoming county commission meeting.

The old jail was originally built as a two-story building in the 1970s with the sheriff's department headquarters on the first floor and county lockup on the second floor.

The first floor was converted to a jail once new headquarters were built across the street. A worsening overcrowding situation, created by a previous county judge, forced the county to turn the county auditorium into a temporary lockup in the late 1980s.

County residents lost the use of their auditorium while a new 400-bed jail was being constructed in Lecanto.

Since the new jail opened, the old jail has sat vacant.

In the meantime, county government is still struggling with space needs in Inverness.

In the next few weeks, commissioners are scheduled to accept a bid to knock down the Inverness landmark. The site will then be turned into a parking lot.

Taxpayers have been given a lot of excuses as to why the building can't be saved. Costs to renovate are too high. It would cost way too much to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. It's a urine-reeking, sick building with viruses is what we're now being told.

It's somewhat ironic that the county

The issue:

Plans to tear down old jail.

Our opinion:

Find an alternative use for property.

auditorium was in similar shape after being a jail for a couple of years, yet it has been returned to a usable facility.

And, if county commissioners were willing to spend money to renovate the old Masonic Building downtown to turn it into offices, and the county doesn't even own it, then why such resistance to the old jail?

Officials are also planning on renovating Park Place, behind the courthouse, for the State Attorney's office. That's another building not owned by the county and the taxpayers will be paying to fix it up.

There have been numerous charitable and non-profit groups that have sought to use the building and they have been turned down.

The idea of creating a juvenile detention facility was also deemed unfeasible.

From the commission's standpoint, the only thing feasible is to tear it down.

From our standpoint, at the least it could be turned into a record storage facility. Estimates for that project with ADA compliance seem somewhat inflated and are pegged at \$730,000.

However, judging from comments at last week's commission meeting, it seems the decision has already been made.

Old jail request greeted with silence

By Earle Kimel
Staff writer

DuWayne Sipper asked the Citrus County Commission on Tuesday to hold off on demolishing the old Citrus County Jail and to give him a chance to locate a Christian intervention center there.

The commission is scheduled to award a bid to tear down the \$1.8 million building July 8. There's no long-range plan for the land other than to use it as a parking lot.

Where board members see an eyesore soaked in urine and filled with germs, Sipper envisions a multi-purpose outreach center that could be a food bank, soup kitchen and place where homeless people can go through a program that guides them back into society.

He wants to pattern it after rescue missions run by the First Baptist Church in Leesburg.

Sipper said the old jail, with the plumbing for kitchen facilities, is instrumental for building that outreach center.

"To me, I don't care what the building looks like," Sipper said. "The outside is fine, the foundation is fine, the roof needs help ... we can repair that."

Sipper wanted the commission to delay awarding the jail demolition contract so that he can line up funding from state, national and private sources to make the outreach program a reality.

"We need some kind of window ... to give us the opportunity to do what we say we can do," Sipper said. "If you destroy the building, that window is

Please see **JAIL**, Page 2A

JAIL

continued from Page 1A

gone, that opportunity is gone."

Board members listened patiently, then, when Sipper asked the board members if they had any questions about his proposal, replied with silence.

"I don't think there's any questions for you," Commission Chairman Jim Fowler finally said.

"I guess I would ask you one or two," he then added.

Fowler asked Sipper if he had been inside the jail and if there had been any cost estimates for renovation.

Sipper replied that he hadn't been inside the building, and only had renovation estimates from County Architect Tom Williford addressing the possibility of using the building as a records storage facility.

Those estimates pegged Americans

With Disabilities Act compliance costs at \$270,000, and tacked on another \$460,000 to make the building usable for records storage.

Sipper told the board he could renovate the jail for one-quarter that because he'd use volunteer labor.

No board member moved to consider Sipper's request.

After the meeting, Fowler said the county will likely go on with its original plan to demolish the jail.

"It's not a building that was constructed to be changed," he added. "It's a prison ... it has negative value."

"There's probably every virus known to man in that building," Fowler said.

"The viruses would be cleaned," Sipper countered.

"You would always have what they call a sick building on your hands," Fowler said.

"Mr. Sipper," he later added, "I applaud you for your efforts and a worthy cause, but I don't believe future plans for that building include using it for anything."

TIMES DIGEST

Jail won't become shelter

INVERNESS — Hernando resident DuWayne Sipper was unable to persuade the County Commission on Tuesday to let him use the old jail in Inverness as a shelter and intervention center for the poor. The commissioners have planned for months to demolish the building and use the land either for parking or for a new county building. Sipper tried to change their minds, saying, "When it's gone, that opportunity is gone." Commissioners listened, but when Sipper was finished, they asked him no questions. After the meeting, Sipper approached commission Chairman Jim Fowler to make one last plea. But Fowler said the building's air is unsafe to breathe because the structure has remained locked and vacant since 1992. "Mr. Sipper, I applaud you for your efforts," Fowler said. "But I don't believe future plans for that building involve using it for anything." At that, Sipper left, but he was undaunted. "We'll look for another site," he said, "and God will provide."

Use old school for a shelter

I LIKE THE idea DuWayne Sipper has of a homeless shelter, although I don't like the idea of using the jail. Why don't Citrus County just let them use the old Lakeview School that's just going to ruin? I think that would be a great idea.

Breakdown informative

I'm calling in regards to last Sunday's issue. I really enjoyed your article on a breakdown of who owns what property in Citrus County. It was very would like to see some more curious about one thing: I reference to people from there is many, many Indian other people in this area, your reference.

Help out the pound

I cannot understand why Citrus County pound, can and cats five days. If you've lost an animal and you it, by the time you get down will be dead. I believe that a seven- to 14-day stay. That's why we can't have an additional thing to help the pound out.

Deceptive advertising

I think it's very deceptive these businesses who were but not this time around – signs out or still advertise in they were the "Best of the" deceptive to people who read **55 makes no sense**

I wish someone would be behind changing the speed on the Highway 486 speedway of Citrus Hills. This section

homes, a social club and a mini-warehouse with curves at both ends. Cars, trucks and semis try to get out on to 486. This makes no sense to me at all, especially since speeders are already going 55.

Should sign a pledge

I see where two more state senators are thinking of jumping ship from Democratic to Republican. From now on, I think anybody who's elected under either party

SOUNDING OFF

Tearing down old jail is a silly idea

CHECK FOR COMMON sense. The commissioners in this mixed-up county want to tear down the old jail. Oh, of course, they want to build a parking lot. What a crazy idea. They put up a building in Lecanto for county offices, yet they want to build a parking space in Inverness. The only thing that this parking space will be used for is a roller skating rink and bicycles.

Why no HMOs?

I would like someone to explain to me how come we can't get HMOs for senior citizens of Citrus County.

It's not her job

Judging from the letters to the editor, Kitty Ebert has evidently elected herself as the chief spokesman for the city council. That's not her job; that's the mayor's job ...

Ignored again

When Mr. (Kevin) Mulligan appeared before the county commissioners regarding EMS, he was absolutely right in just about everything he stated. However, the commissioners, as usual, turned a deaf ear to his suggestions and comments. It's unreal to believe that these people think that they ... do not have to abide by the wishes of the people of Citrus County.

Letter hit the mark

We heartily applaud the letter Joan West wrote to the Chronicle outlining the shameful actions taken by the three Crystal River Council members ...

Lay off Dawsy

Why don't they leave Sheriff Dawsy alone? I think he's a very good sheriff.

Need those jobs

To the thing that was in the paper, "It's all relative": Maybe the young reader wants higher-paying jobs here and growth in our county because he never could afford to go to Alaska like you could.

A nickel full of rocks

The taxpayers are spending millions of dollars to see pictures of rocks on Mars. I ate candy bars made there over 60 years ago. They only cost a nickel.

Parkway to Mars

Who do you think will be first on Mars, a fast-food franchise or a real estate developer putting up inexpensive homes for the masses? It would be interesting to see what happens ...

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The Chronicle invites you to call "Sounding Off" with your feelings on any subject. You do not need to leave your name. You will have up to 30 seconds, though are asked to be as concise as possible.

Comments will be edited rigorously for length, personal attacks, slander, and good taste. While this does not prohibit criticism of public figures, the editors will cut what they deem libelous or inappropriate.

The recorder will be in service 24 hours a day. If you get a busy signal, call back later.

Opinions expressed are purely those of the callers.