

Tuesday, January 6, 2009 9:43 PM CST  
Mattoon council drops proposal giving local bidders preference

Journal Gazette Times-Courier Online

By HERB MEEKER, Staff Writer

MATTOON — City commissioners Tuesday offered the green light for restoring the railroad depot in midtown but put the brake on offering a preference to local contractors on public works projects.

The vote was unanimous for seeking bids in February on approval of plans and specifications for the restoration of the 90-year-old brick structure that serves up to 2,800 Amtrak passengers per month. In 2005, the project received a commitment of \$2.74 million in federal grants, and about \$400,000 in private donations have been pledged to the effort through the Depot Project Fundraising Committee, affiliated with the Coles County Historical Society.

“This is a great day for us,” said Jackie Record, who heads the committee, which has worked for many years to restore the old depot as a key part of the city’s history. “We have enough money to cover the 20 percent as the local match for this.”

The improvements will include work to install a new elevator; update electrical and climate control, water and sewer systems; and overall restoration of the interior and exterior of the tri-level, brick structure. In the future, a county history museum and possibly commercial venues will be added to the old depot, which once included a diner and offices along Broadway Avenue.

The depot, which has served passengers since 1918, was once called the “entrance hall” to the city when passenger trains were the main source of long-distance transportation.

In other business, Commissioner Joe McKenzie declined to offer a motion on the contractor ordinance amendment after several residents spoke against the change.

The council was considering a preference to local contractors in awarding bids within 2 percent or \$2,000 of the lowest bid of an out-of-town contractor. However, this would only apply to jobs funded by city revenues alone, not state or federal funds, a rarity based on a review of bidding history for the city.

“I don’t feel comfortable making it since it hasn’t happened in six years,” McKenzie said.

Mattoon residents Chris Rankin, Brad Metcalf and Harold Burrell all voiced opposition to the idea of a contractor preference for several reasons, including the risk of cutting down the total number of bidders that could raise the overall costs of public works jobs in the future.

Rankin said one large Mattoon contractor on public works jobs opposed the idea as well.

“You would be passing an ordinance that will force the city to spend more money,” said Rankin.

“A guy in town has an advantage from the start because they don’t face the same costs as people from out of town. It doesn’t make any sense for someone in town not to be competitive on bids,” said Metcalf.

“It’s such a small thing and if you’re not having a problem with it why mess with it?” said Burrell.

Commissioner Randy Ervin offered support for the proposal, saying it amounted to an “investment” in the local work force, especially when many people are facing layoffs or tough times. But he was surprised to find a local contractor was opposed to the idea.

With no motion offered by McKenzie or other council members, the proposal ended. It was supported last week by the city’s Public Works Advisory Board.

The council also voted to move ahead and join a lawsuit against the manufacturer of Atrazine, a widely-used herbicide, because it has been streaming into Lakes Mattoon and Paradise from surrounding farm fields.

Water department Superintendent Jim Lange said the lawsuit could provide funding for new equipment to concentrate on removing all traces of the chemical from the city water supply. He explained tests of city water supplies have not shown any health risk from the herbicide runoffs, but more stringent testing standards could require higher purity levels on Atrazine and possibly other chemicals in the water supply.

“Right now we only test every three months. But if that changes we could be required to remove this. This could help us get ahead of the game,” Lange said.

Mattoon City Attorney Preston Owen said the Texas-based law firm bringing the suit bases its fees on what is won through the lawsuit. He said Baron & Budd, P.C. and Korein Tillery specializes in pollution lawsuits.

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