

Press release from DLGF stuns council

By Debbie Lowe
Staff writer

Months, maybe even a year ago, one of the first questions the *Comet* asked a representative of the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance (DLGF) when comprehensive coverage of the county financial crisis began, was how that office could approve budgets over the past several years in which appropriations consistently exceeded income. The *Comet* was told at that time the DLGF had reason to believe there was money enough to fund the appropriations.

It was discovered from a press release from DLGF last Thursday the reason that assumption was made was because the county financial data supplied to them was in error. Investment fund amounts had been added into the general fund in 2004 which made the general fund appear to contain much

more money than was actually true. DLGF's conclusions that the county had the necessary funds for the budgets were based on that number, which they called a "mistake in balancing the checkbook of the county."

Reactions to the Letter to the Editor, printed in its entirety in the *Lafayette Journal & Courier's* March 22 edition (and printed on page 5A in today's issue of the *Comet*), among council members were similar - frustration. Council president Nancy S. Cripe sent an e-mail to the DLGF asking for further explanation and clarification.

"Ms. Michalak: I read your Letter to the Editor in the *Journal & Courier* on March 22, 2008. As you stated in your letter it is very important that the public receive information about the current financial situation in Carroll County. It is even more important that the Carroll County officials re-

ceive information. Point in fact is that the Finance Committee has been working with the DLGF and SBOA (State Board of Accounts) since early 2007. No mention has ever been made of an error in balancing the checkbook of the county in 2004. Who actually overstated the General Fund balance and when did the DLGF find the error? Had this mistake been brought to the attention of the Council prior to reading it in a Letter to the Editor, Carroll County might not be in this financial situation. If any official was notified of an error, please provide me a copy of that correspondence. If there was only verbal notification, please advise the date, who from the DLGF made contact, and what official was notified. I will await your reply."

Mary Jane Michalak, Director of Communications for DLGF told the *Comet* Monday that their office tracks

government financial news stories. She said the DLGF office thought some "historical information (about the current financial situation) was not understood."

Michalak said she and DLGF Commissioner Cheryl Musgrave made the joint decision to issue the press release.

Ron Slavens, council finance committee member, said Tuesday he was not frustrated with DLGF, but with those closer to home.

"I'm blaming the county officials in charge of accounting for errors," he said. "To me, it's inexcusable we've gone on this long."

"This shows the necessity of getting our books balanced to our bank accounts," he added. "This leaves us wide open to errors of this magnitude."

"I'm awestruck," Cripe said Tuesday. "This is a surprise to us. I can't

believe it. I think this makes us look bad. I just don't understand."

"I can't imagine we weren't notified - and if we were and nobody said anything, that's even worse," she added.

"I am upset the finance committee was not informed about this," Ann Brown said. "We have met with the DLGF numerous times and we've never been told this. It was never known to us."

A late Tuesday afternoon e-mail to Ann Brown from the DLGF acknowledged several communications between the state office and county officials. An invitation was extended to select county leaders to meet Friday in Indianapolis with DLGF commissioner Musgrave.

The *Comet* formally requested from DLGF public records "concerning the budget situation in Carroll County, Indiana, from Jan. 1, 2004, through
Continued page 5A

APC increases permit fees

By Debbie Lowe
Staff writer

It was a long-time in coming, but after reviewing 14 surrounding counties' charges for building permits, Carroll County Area Plan Commission raised fees for services provided by the local office. Pleased that new zoning administrator Kathy Mylet was able to provide the comparison chart at her first APC meeting, the commission considered written recommendations, consulted the chart and adopted a new set of charges to be effective upon the approval of county commissioners.

Their recommended fee schedule follows:

- New residence - \$.15/sq.ft;
- Remodel & Accessories - \$.15/sq.ft. with a \$50 minimum;
- Commercial - \$.10/sq.ft. with \$1,000 maximum;
- PUD - \$100 plus \$20/lot;
- Subdivision - \$100 plus \$20/lot;
- Special Exception - \$60;
- Variance - \$60;
- Rezone - \$100;
- Appeal - \$50;
- CFO/CAFO Pre-application permit - \$50;
- Home occupation permit - \$20;
- Vacation of plat - \$200;
- and
- Failure to get a permit - \$50 plus twice the permit fee.

Other business

Delphi mayor Randy Strasser urged the commission

to protect land surrounding planned Hoosier Heartland Corridor interchanges. He said

it would not be prudent to allow construction, including billboards, to happen in those areas. He said failure to protect the land would result in increased costs for building the highway. Commission members rejected a suggestion made by county council for the area plan office to move into the surveyor's office and share a part-time clerical person. The council did away with funding the secretary position in county budget reductions and the surveyor's second deputy position was reduced to part-time.

The next meeting will be April 22 at 7 p.m.

BZA

Carroll County Board of Zoning Appeals officers for 2008 are: Pat Baker, president, and Harry Jones, vice president. APC attorney Cynthia Harmon was retained as legal counsel.

A variance from the county flood ordinance flood protection grade was granted to Charles Pestow for a residence at 11076 N. Lower Lake Shore Dr. from 619.2 feet to 618. While discussing the variance, it was discovered that two side yards to the residence would also need a variance, which was written and granted at the same time.

Joshua Diggs was granted a variance from the 25-foot set back requirement for a garage.



Mylet

Heartbeat of Mother Earth



The Eel River Tribe of Indiana's drummers, the Massassagans, and Friends of Carroll County Parks hosted a local event last Friday, joining "8,000 Drums Across the World." In Native American culture, the rhythm of the drum represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth. The worldwide event calls for unity in preserving the earth. The local celebration was held at county-owned Deer Creek Park. "This piece of land matters," said Mike Floyd, chief of the Eel River Tribe of Indiana and organizer of the local event. The Massassagans drummed and chanted, and others who brought drums joined in the rhythm. A prayer song and warrior song were among the chants. Donations taken at the event will go toward upkeep at the county's two parks. Comet photos by Jennifer Archibald

Commissioners meet at request of council

Short agenda yet 60 percent unresolved

By Debbie Lowe
Staff writer

Carroll County Commissioners were urged by county council

to meet in special session to address over-spending issues and help stem the constant loss of tax dollars. The special meeting was held Thursday for three and a half hours, but three out of the five agenda items, or 60 percent, were left unresolved.

Council members Steve Ashby and Ann Brown attended the meeting. Brown, who is the chair of the council finance committee formed in January 2007 to address what appeared to be a significant financial situation, addressed commissioners before they began their work.

"We are here today to request that you (the commissioners) make decisions on several proposals to help Carroll County with the financial crunch that we are currently experiencing," Brown read from a prepared statement. "...Based on the taxes we pay and other incoming revenue from fees, we have become comfortable with having some things that we never should have enjoyed in the first place."

"...Without the understanding and agreement of the commissioners, we cannot move forward to solve our financial problems," Brown concluded. "Therefore, we are here today to make requests for your consid-

eration to heal the financial wounds of our county."

"It's imperative everybody realize this is serious," Ashby added. "It's not pleasant. We have to go the rest of the way."

Carroll Manor

Commissioners raised the rates at Carroll Manor to \$56 per day for all residents. The action will not become effective for 45 days. In the meantime, Manor superintendent Martha Lewis was directed to bring a graduated rate scale to the April 7 commissioners meeting.

Lewis insisted there are at least five of the 20 residents the action would affect who will not be able to pay the increased amount. Residents are currently paying \$28/day.

According to council finance committee members Ann Brown, Steve Ashby and Ron Slavens it costs approximately \$56/day to house, feed and provide for the 20 residents (Lewis reported 21 residents, however one is on state assistance). At the current rate, the county is subsidizing the facility at approximately \$211,700/year which translates to \$17,642/month or \$580/day.

Commissioners president Loren Hylton noted that when at capacity when the space is increased due to the installation of

the elevator (not yet completed), the cost per resident to fully fund the facility would be \$31/day. Brown said Hylton was using figures based on a 12-month period, which would be misleading given one-third of the year was already gone.

Resident Larry Trapp clarified that the facility was not at capacity. He said it was not fair to the sheriff and EMS departments to continue to use taxpayer dollars to subsidize the non-essential services.

Council candidate Scott Ayres suggested that if the home could not be filled at the previous cost of \$25/day, it was unrealistic to expect all the beds would be filled at any higher cost.

Flora Clerk-Treasurer Joretta Tinsman suggested the land around the Manor was not as important to the community as ambulance service and urged commissioners to sell the land.

"Carroll County is a business and it's ready to go to bankruptcy," she said.

Tinsman urged commissioners to liquidate the land. She offered to contact Indiana Packers Corporation representatives to initiate negotiations. Hylton replied that he has contacted IPC in the past three months for that purpose.

Custodian contract

Commissioners signed a new contract with Sheryl Shockley to become the full-time custodian and Chuck Appleton to be a part-time worker, effectively switching their positions. The contract is effective April 1.

Appleton has earned 178 hours of compensatory time, three weeks of vacation and one personal day. He will accrue more vacation before the action would become effective. Unless he takes some of the time off, Appleton will be paid for all he has accumulated per the county personnel policy.

Health insurance

Commissioners tabled the discussion about health insurance to consult with their agent of record, Cindy Finkenbinder. She will appear at the April 7 meeting.

The council recommended commissioners reduce coverage to employees only. Currently coverage is offered for employees' families.

A question arose about the ability to change the current policy before the end of the year.

Commissioners attorney Barry Emerson advised changing the policy mid-year would be "unfair" to employees.

Deer Creek Park

No action was taken to liquidate the county asset. However Carroll County Park Board President Bob Burton learned the \$5,000 appropriated in the budget was for French Post Park, not including Deer Creek Park.

Burton said he expected to increase revenue in 2008 with more advertising and signage. Council member Rob Baker noted the council has heard the same claims for at least two years and the goals never reach fruition.

"I'm not in favor of selling assets until I see a padlock on the courthouse door," commissioner George Mears said.

Cumulative Bridge Fund

Council requested commissioners defer partial payment of the \$675,000 loan from the account made in January to have enough equity in the general fund to pay county claims. Brown said it was a recommendation from the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance to classify \$350,000 of the total borrowed as a "public works project loan" to be paid back at a later date. The balance of the loan would be paid back by Dec. 31.

Commissioners took no action on the matter.

Continued page 5A