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Napoleon Council hears from CCHC representatives

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Napoleon Council Monday heard from two representatives of the Cultural Center of Henry County (CCHC) who shared their commitment to restoring the former school building which includes the John L. Johnson (JLJ) Auditorium and asked for litigation regarding the building to be dropped.

Napoleon Area City Schools and the City of Napoleon originally filed a lawsuit for breach of contract against the CCHC in March 2023 in regard to the former Central Elementary School/Napoleon Middle School, including the auditorium, which is no longer utilized by the school district. The non-profit organization purchased the property on West Main Street for \$1 in 2017 with the goal of renovating it into a community/cultural center. According to the purchase agreement for that property, a deadline of five years was included to complete renovations or all parts of the building that did not have an occupancy permit would be demolished utilizing an escrow fund that included funds from a private donor. The original lawsuit alleged the organization was in breach of the contract as it did not complete the renovation of the building within the five-year time frame, which ended in the summer of 2022, and the building has not yet been demolished.

In January 2025, Henry County Common Pleas Court Judge Amy Rosebrook ruled the CCHC is in breach of contract and ordered the organization to comply with its remaining obligations under the contract, which includes demolishing the building. However, in April 2025, the CCHC was granted a stay for the enforcement of the court decision ordering the demolition of the building pending appeals and deposited \$75,000 as a bond. An appeal was filed in June 2025 by the CCHC to the Third District Court of Appeals, which affirmed the Henry County court's decision June 29.

On Monday, Laura Retcher and Beth Meekison shared memories of the school building, including the auditorium, while emphasizing what they believe the building converted into a cultural center could bring to the community.

"We can offer people more opportunities and incentive to want to live here," Retcher said. "Buildings like that are rarely constructed today. Its craftsmanship, architecture and character represent an important part of our community's heritage."

"Why would we choose to destroy one of our community's most significant historical landmarks?" she added. "Over the years, a great deal of taxpayer money has been spent on legal battles surrounding the cultural center. Regardless of where people stand on the issue, it is reasonable to ask whether those resources could have been better invested in restoring and improving this historic building. Imagine what the cultural center could already be today if those funds had been directed toward preservation."

Both Retcher and Meekison's remarks were halted due to exceeding the five-minute allotment for those addressing council, but a press release issued during the meeting by the cultural center notes the organization faces an Aug. 14 deadline regarding the next step in the legal process and asks the school district and city to drop the litigation, redirect focus toward renovation and allow the school district to use the center's two gyms until it can build its own capacity.

A portion of the press release, as well as a portion of Meekison's remarks, also noted the recently Henry County Events Center at the fairgrounds was completed with assistance from the county commissioners.

"We've got a community center, a cultural center, on one hand, and we've got a very nice, expensive \$5.7 million barn?" Meekison said. "On the other hand, it is very good for agricultural events and special events, and we don't want to take anything away from that. We want to celebrate that. But what about the fairness to the rest of the community? There's 28,000 citizens here, and don't ... we deserve a community center?"

The press release also alleged the county has given \$4.1 million to the events center project and requested the same level of financial support from the city for this project.

The Henry County Events Center was initiated by a non-profit organization, the Henry County Ag Improvement Association (HCAIA), which fundraised for the construction of the building and raised nearly \$2 million. In April 2023, costs for the project more than doubled to more than \$5 million, so the organization and the Henry County Agricultural Society (fair board) asked the commissioners for financial assistance with the project. The association turned the project over to the county, and the county commissioners took out a \$4.1 million loan for the construction

to be completed with the understanding the loan would be paid back by the ag improvement association. Details on how those funds will be paid back to the county is currently underway. At the beginning of the fundraising efforts, the commissioners did donate \$250,000 toward the project.

The center's press release also shares the cultural center could be utilized emergency shelter capacity and housing and could serve entire families in a variety of programming.

Council President Ross Durham thanked for those for addressing council and declined to make any comment in response, citing the ongoing legal matter.

In other matters, council:

- Approved the first reading of a resolution authorizing the finance director to certify and file special assessments for two nuisance properties with the county auditor. Finance Director Kevin Garringer explained these assessments occur when the city performs cleanup work for a nuisance property and the invoices sent to the owner are not paid.
- Authorized the city manager to apply for and accept Ohio Public Works Commission State Capital Improvement Program and Local Transportation Improvement Program funds for 2027. Public Works Director Chad Lulfs explained he would like to apply for a grant for the planned reconstruction of Fillmore Street from Oakwood Avenue to Vocke Street. This grant could be up to \$400,000, and Lulfs said they would like to pair it with another grant for approximately \$500,000. "We're hoping that will offset majority of the costs," Lulfs said, adding the current estimate is \$1.5 million. This was approved under the suspension of rules requiring three readings and as an emergency, so it's effective immediately, so the application can be submitted by the deadline.
- Held an executive session regarding the appointment, employment, dismissal, discipline, promotion, demotion or compensation of a public employee. No action was taken after the session.

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