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RF City Council approves permit for anaerobic digester

By Sarah Nigbor

RIVER FALLS – The River Falls City Council approved a special use permit Jan. 23 for an anaerobic digester, located at W10322 Highway 29, despite citizen pleas not to. Council members made clear they must approve the permit if requirements are met, due to state law.

The recommendation was forwarded to the city council by the River Falls ETZ Committee. The Extra Territorial Zoning district is the area lying outside of the city. Its purpose is to provide proper zoning for land use control over the area and to allow for orderly growth and development.



This map shows the location of a proposed anaerobic digester on the Peterson property at W10322 Highway 29 in the town of River Falls. The property is located in the River Falls Extra-territorial Zoning District. Map courtesy of City of River Falls

The proposed facility will be located on the parcel im-

mediately north of the exist-

ing Peterson dairy farm in the

town of River Falls, adjacent to a sand extraction area. The Peterson family owns the majority of the land around

the 11-acre project, said Emily Shively, assistant director of community development.

The 80 acres to the east and 160 acres to the north of the proposed facility are zoned Exclusive Agriculture in the City of River Falls ETZ and the approximately 160 acres to the southwest of the proposed facility are zoned Farmland Preservation in the Town of River Falls.

The facility will combine manure from the farm's operations with organic food waste brought to the facility from food producers, restaurants, grocery stores and other organic food waste, a city memo states. No manure from other farms will be used.

"The anaerobic digester

See DIGESTER, Page A-10

Leo's Landing supporters rally around Anderson family

By Sarah Nigbor

PRESCOTT – Supporters of Leo's Landing Marina used a Jan. 18 Prescott riverfront improvement public information meeting to speak on behalf of the Anderson family's business. The City of Prescott has chosen not to renew a lease with the marina, which expired Dec. 31, 2023, in preparation for Phase 2 of its riverfront improvement project.

City Administrator Matt Wolf and City Engineer Greg Adams of Cedar Corp tried to steer the conversation toward the elements of the project, but questions kept turning back to what will happen to

the marina, owned by Jan Anderson and her son and daughter-in-law Colton and Nikki Anderson. Many in attendance are Leo's Landing customers.

In a letter submitted to the city council and city attorney, Jan Anderson said Leo's Landing has been operated by her family for 38 years, and before that, the Simones family. Captain Dick established the marina in 1963.

"We are locals, paying taxes and rent to the City of Prescott, employing Prescott employees and supporting community organizations," Anderson wrote. We have loyal customers, good neighbors, and until recently, a



Jan Anderson, her family and supporters attend a Jan. 18 Prescott riverfront improvement project public information meeting and listened as Alderperson Pat Knox speaks to those gathered. Photo by Sarah Nigbor

good relationship with the city."

Anderson said her family and the city have operated on a "mostly handshake agreement" regarding cross the

sliver of property between her land and the water's edge.

"In part, it was because it was not clear to anyone who owned the maybe 10-15

yards between our property and the St. Croix/Mississippi, at most times considered river bottom," Anderson wrote. "For many years, we paid nominal 'rent' to the City and neither side spent too much effort to clearly define the legal description of the strip. That changed a few years ago."

In a phone interview Jan. 19, Wolf said when 2021 ended, the Andersons were informed of the proposed riverfront project.

"We let them know the riverfront planning was going on and we let them know that there was a chance the

See LEO'S, Page A-11

Sheriff, judge, DA speak in favor of new judicial facility

By Sarah Nigbor

While the Pierce County Board did not vote Jan. 23 on bond issuance for a proposed judicial facility or to use funds toward its design, those in attendance heard from county officials on why the facility is desperately needed. The board will vote on the resolutions at the February meeting.

On the agenda was the first reading of two resolutions related to borrowing an amount not to exceed

\$30,475,000 for the proposed facility, which would be built next to the Pierce County Sheriff's Office at 555 W. Overlook Drive in Ellsworth. The other resolution is to authorize the use of county funds on hand to pay for the design costs of the proposed judicial facility.

Before opening up public comment, Board Chair Jon Aubart asked the 30 or so attendees to listen to information from county officials.

Pierce County Sheriff Chad Koranda said he finds

himself in a precarious situation by speaking in favor of the judicial facility.

"I don't want to be the poster child, though I support it," Koranda said. "I will tell you factually why I am and why the department would be in support."

COVID really brought the nuances of court security in Pierce to the forefront, he said. The current historic courthouse, located at 414 W. Main St. in downtown Ellsworth, was built in 1905.

See PCB, Page A-12



The Pierce County Courthouse, built in 1905, is on the National Register of Historic Places. While beautiful, court officials say the 118-year-old building isn't functional for today's courts. File photo

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PCB

from Page 1

“We’ve staved off putting any money into it for 118 years,” Koranda said. “Had we built it in 1998, the cost would have been \$14 to \$15 million. Now it’s \$30 million. Now here I stand in support of something that takes money out of your pockets. That’s a really big responsibility and I hope you don’t think I take it lightly. I will be the one blamed if something goes wrong up there.”

He spoke about the confined rotunda area outside the courtrooms on the second floor, an area where suspects, victims, and juries all mingle, sometimes uncomfortably. The architecture opens to the first floor below.

“What if someone pushes someone over the railing?” he asked the quiet audience.

He also spoke about deputies transporting inmates from the jail to the courthouse and back, a total of 1.3 miles each way. It sounds small, but a lot can happen in 1.3 miles.

“When you’re transporting someone, you’re in the danger zone,” Koranda said. “We’re bringing them to a public facility that has no unified entrance. We are relegated to the one elevator, which is public, where victims, suspects, all run into each other. That’s a problem. If you were a victim of a crime and if they robbed your house or sexually assaulted your child, would you want to ride up that elevator with them? That has happened.”

Koranda said sometimes people have to be arrested at the courthouse and with only one transport officer in the department, then a patrol officer has to be taken off the roads to help.

“We have incidents up there. Last year, one individual left the courthouse and didn’t want to come back and we ended up having to arrest them on Main Street,” Koranda said. “If they leave, they are downtown.”

Koranda was present when Supreme Court US Marshal Tammy Johnson conducted a surprise security inspection on the courthouse. While much of the information can’t be released for safety reasons, she noted concern that all three court/hearing rooms are accessible from multiple entrances and that the judge’s chambers are directly adjacent to a public hallway where people are free to mill around. Also noted were some windows are screwed shut, preventing escape.

“The mechanical equipment is essentially open to the public,” Koranda said. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but poisons could be released into the duct work. One person was able to peer through a window and watch a county attorney work on their computer.”

Johnson was especially concerned about the lack of separation between victims and suspects and the process in which suspects are brought into the courthouse/courtroom.

“We bring them to a public parking lot,” Koranda

said. “We ride the elevator to the third floor to a public hallway and bring them to the courtroom. One problem we have really run into now, is when court is busy or behind schedule, we have nowhere to bring them. We have to stand out with them in the lobby and hang out with them. There is no secure holding cell.”

“In 2019, one thing I noticed is in one courtroom where there is a jury box, the individual who is on trial, they sit right by the door where the jury is walked out of. If you believe in our system, you realize that creates a problem. Walking within inches of them could have an effect on the jurors’ decisions.”

A recent sexual assault trial drew more than 80 people to the courthouse, between jurors, victims, the suspect and their families. That’s a lot of people using two bathrooms that aren’t handicapped friendly.

“I haven’t even addressed the biggest concern,” Koranda said. “The multiple accesses and doors to that area and we have no weapons screening. We do the best we can. Last year we requested extra staff over here 14 times for that. We have purchased a metal detector that sits outside of the West Courtroom, but they are already in the building.”

“We know the world has changed now. Our courtrooms and public institutions have become targets for some people. We have some significant problems with our facilities that I do not see being mitigated through renovation, but that doesn’t mean I’m not open to good conversation.”

Koranda added that security staff are also trying to keep staff safe in the Register of Deeds, District Attorney’s office, Clerk of Courts, etc.

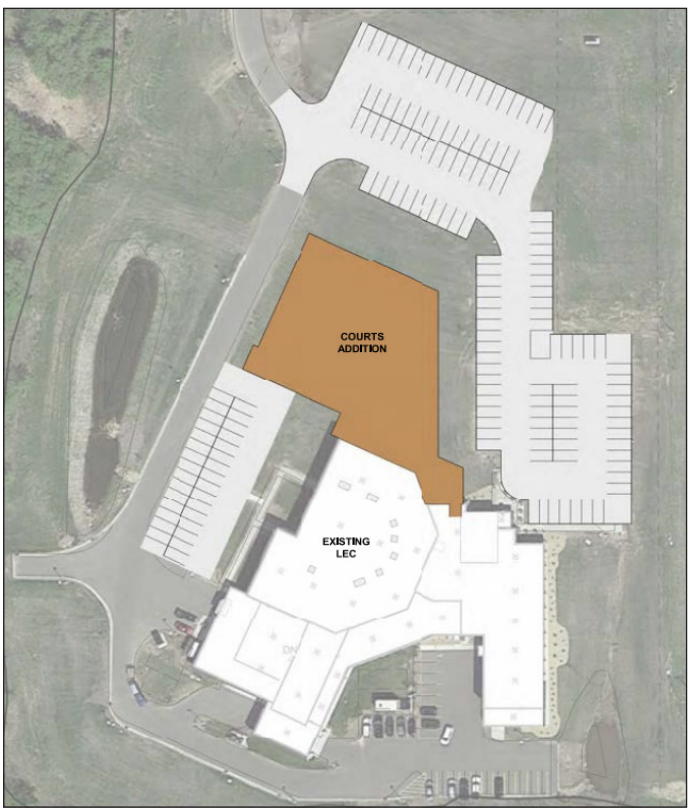
“Back in the day when we were down here (when the jail was next door), we had a whole host of people who could respond within seconds. That’s not the case with us being offsite. The frequency that we have incidents that we’re able to mitigate through de-escalation is awesome, but what if officers have to come in lights and sirens and T-bone a car out here? Is sinking \$30 million into a brand new building going to solve everything? No, but it’s a step in the right direction,” Koranda said.

Judge Rohl

Pierce County Circuit Court Judge Elizabeth Rohl introduced Patrick Brummund, the district court administrator for Wisconsin’s 7th Judicial District. He has served in his current role for 22 years. She called is expertise unparalleled.

“This project is monumental and it shouldn’t be taken lightly,” Rohl said. “I recognize that proceeding with a project like this the county won’t be able to do other things.”

She echoed Koranda’s comments on court security and safety, but said it pertains to all departments. The Ad Hoc Committee has studied extensively how to rearrange county departments and will



This rendering shows where a proposed judicial facility would go adjacent to the Pierce County Sheriff’s Office at 555 W. Overlook Drive in Ellsworth. Map courtesy of Pierce County

continue to do so, Rohl said.

“The way that we are currently fit into these buildings, there is not a lot of room for expansion,” she said. “Human Services especially needs more separation between clients and public space. This would provide a breathing room for all of the county departments.”

She also spoke about the lack of electrical outlets in the 118-year-old courthouse, which make using today’s technology difficult. Another concern is the growing number of caseloads in the county, which could easily support a second circuit court judge. Currently Rohl is the sole judge, along with Court Commissioner Jorv Gavic.

“Building a courthouse doesn’t guarantee we would be allocated another branch,” Rohl said. “If we don’t, we wouldn’t be considered.”

Brummund said in his 30 years in Wisconsin, he has stood before many county boards considering this same decision. Those who have chosen to build a courthouse had no regrets, he said, except not building it sooner. He then explained how the state decides the number of judges per county.

“In Wisconsin we have a weighted caseload study we update every 10 years,” he said. “It provides an objective measure of how much work there is for a judge in the county based on filings and the amount of time it takes. This has been a strong two-judicial officer county for a long time.”

Another assessment will be conducted over the next few years. The workload is not going to change in Pierce County; it’s going to continue to go up, Brummund said. Of the 15 counties he oversees, the workload needs to be equalized.

“Pierce County has enough workload in felonies alone to support another judge. We’re doing it with a court commissioner and Judge Rohl,” Brummund said.

Rohl pointed out one courtroom must be shut down to house the jury when there’s a jury trial. The courthouse also contains no facilities for visiting reserve judges. Since court reporters are

vices, and \$27.9 million in construction costs.

“Bonding for this amount considering existing debt, the increase to the County’s mill rate is projected to result in an additional \$31 per \$100,000 property valuation for the taxpayer for the first 3 years (2025- 2028), including the existing debt levy and will begin to decrease thereafter until 2032 where existing debt falls off and the new debt will remain flat for the remainder of the bond term, if the County were to issue no new debt during that time,” a county memo states.

Matthys said \$900,000 in bond premium from the jail project can be leveraged toward this project in order to decrease the amount the county borrows. The county would use \$1.9 million in cash on hand for the design/planning, also reducing the amount to borrow. With a 20-year repayment term, the annual payment (with interest) would be \$2,375,000.

Operational costs have to be figured out, but are not part of this bond initiative.

“Hopefully in the end we can reduce our facility footprint. There are some ideas and concepts floating,” Matthys said. “I’m not super in favor of a \$30 million facility as a county taxpayer either, but I recognize that sometimes courthouses, schools need to be built. We will be held liable if we are aware of the issues and do nothing. Then we would be having this discussion again.”

Public comment

Several citizens spoke during public comment against the proposed facility, including John Danneker of Maiden Rock.

“I listened to what the sheriff had to say, and what the judge had to say, and I’ll just say that I am not here to vote or speak against the new facility,” Danneker said. “It’s the process I’m not in favor of. I found out about this on Thursday. I printed out 197 pages, a tremendous amount of information.”

He questioned the \$30 million number, saying the real number is higher when interest and the salaries of a new judge and related staff are factored in. Not to mention the costs of repurposing the existing courthouse, annex and Pierce County Office Building.

“Since this process started, on Feb. 14, 2023 it has moved rather quickly,” he said. “The vast majority of people in Pierce County don’t have any concept of what’s going on, what it costs and what it’s going to do for them. The process needs to slow down and the people need the proper information.”

He questioned whether board supervisors have read through the information and understand it.

A Spring Valley resident asked for a “60-day cooling off period” before sending the proposal to a county-wide referendum.

Lisa Kuchinski of Maiden Rock said she lost her business thanks to the county’s COVID mandates and is a struggling single mother. She would like to see a more pre-

ventive approach.

“What can we do to not have so many criminals where we live? What are we doing to stop having criminals? As a community, why don’t we strive to have no criminals here, instead of putting it into judicial and safety, safety,” she said.

Pierce County District Attorney Halle Hatch spoke at the end and echoed her support for the proposed facility.

“Working in the courthouse every single day, there are many security issues,” she said. “Victim/witnesses are often in close proximity to defendants. We deal with sex assaults, human trafficking, very difficult interactions in a tight proximity. The technology in the courtrooms is not up to snuff for what we would need to present to the juries.”

“Our office is getting more and more cases and more serious cases.”

Matthys made sure to note the county board has had the information for over a year, ample time to read through it all.

“You’ve had the information for a long time. There’s a tab on the website on the county’s front page. I didn’t want anyone to think that this was something borne overnight and thrown into one packet.”

Board reaction

Supervisor Scott Bjork (River Falls) said once the county build a jail, the plan was to eventually add a judicial facility addition. He wishes the county could have paid off the jail first, but said “the circumstances and the way they’ve played out in society nowadays, we’re going to have to do the courts sooner than we would have liked to have.”

Supervisor Neil Gulbranson (Ellsworth), retired Pierce County chief deputy, has been involved in the discussion for 20 years.

“It has been studied by professionals, ad hoc committees, and citizen members. It came to a conclusion in ‘16 or ‘17 when they looked at all of the options. The consensus of everybody involved was, it was more efficient to build the jail where we did,” he said. “It was controversial but we picked that spot because it had the room where we could have the judicial center. What scares me is, I actually thought when we built the jail out there, we could have just pounded a sign in the dirt and said it was going there. The same plan, same square footage, every month we wait, it’s \$120,000 it goes up in costs conservatively. I think it should be just done for just the security alone, for the victims, for those who work there. Now. We shouldn’t be waiting.”

Supervisor Jim Ashbach (town of Clifton), who has been a general contractor for 23 years, said a 6% inflationary cost increase is probably light.

“If we don’t do this, it’s going to cost us \$40 million bucks,” he said.

The board will vote on the resolutions at the Feb. 27 meeting.

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