

Minutes of Meeting
Romer Building
September 4, 2019
4:00 p.m.

The Kootenai County Board of Commissioners: Chairman Chris Fillios and Commissioner Leslie Duncan met to discuss the following agenda item. Also present were Human Resources (HR) Director Sylvia Proud, Civil Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Pat Braden, Resources Management Office (RMO) Senior Program Manager Kimberli Riley, Senior Staff Accountant Melissa Merrifield, BOCC Communications Manager Nancy Jones, BOCC Administrative Supervisor Leighanna Keiser, BOCC Senior Business Analyst Nanci Plouffe, BOCC Front Desk Coordinator Chandra Newberry, Information Technology (IT) PC/Network Specialist Ben Stallings and Deputy Clerk Tina Ginorio. Also present were Contractor Shawn Riley, Coeur d’Alene Press Reporter Brian Walker, Coeur d’Alene City Councilman Dan Gookin, and Kootenai County Residents Daryl Jorgenson, Mark Johnstone, Glen Warriner, ZoeAnn Thrumman, Kiki Miller, Dan Everhart, Jana Taylor, Chad Taylor and Ron Deady, Commissioner Bill Brooks was excused.

- A. Call to Order:** Chairman Chris Fillios called the meeting to order at 4:03 p.m.
- B. Changes to the Agenda (Action):** There were no changes to the agenda.
- C. Business:**

Romer Building Public Presentation (Discussion)

Chairman Fillios explained that ZoeAnn Thrumman had requested this special meeting about the Romer Building. He clarified that this was not a public hearing but a public meeting. He said a public hearing was generally demanded by ordinances, while a public meeting was offered at the discretion of the BOCC.

Chairman Fillios stated that one hour had been allocated for the meeting, but it could be allowed to run longer. He said that presentations would be limited to ten minutes to allow everyone to be heard.

Commissioner Leslie Duncan thanked those present for their interest. She explained that the property had been purchased about two years ago with the intent of using the space to expand County offices. She noted that the County was mandated by the State to provide justice-related services and stated she wanted to be certain that people in the County would be well served by the courts. She informed those assembled that Idaho Supreme Court had been working with Counties to provide pre-trial services to prevent people from having to spend an extended time in jail.

Commissioner Duncan assured those assembled that the Board was not eager expand County office space, but felt it was required to serve the interests of the public.

Information Technology (IT) PC/Network Specialist Ben Stallings exited the meeting at 4:05 p.m.

Chairman Fillios introduced the County staff assisting with the meeting:

- BOCC Front Desk Coordinator Chandra Newberry
- Shawn Riley, former Buildings & Grounds (B&G) Director, now on contract with the County.
- Civil Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Pat Braden

Chairman Fillios stated that the Romer Building was built in 1910 and explained that the former owner had approached the BOCC some years ago asking if the County would be interested in buying it. He said the County had accepted a first right of refusal on the property and then, about two years ago, he had negotiated the purchase for \$425,000. Chairman Fillios said that the County's intent had always been to use the land to fulfill the County's need for increased office space.

Chairman Fillios stated that he and Mr. Riley had examined the property carefully. He added that Mr. Riley, as the former B&G Director, had detailed knowledge of the building. Chairman Fillios also said that a formal property inspection had been made in which it was estimated that it would cost at least \$200,000 to make the building habitable once more. He added that the building, as it stood, would only be able to house seven to ten people and the County needed far more space than that. He stated that the BOCC was left with the only reasonable choice being to demolish the building and put something new on the site.

Chairman Fillios opened the meeting to public comment.

- D. Public Comment (Discussion):** This section is reserved for citizens wishing to address the Board regarding a County-related issue. Idaho Law prohibits Board action on items brought under this section except in an emergency circumstance. Comments related to future public hearings should be held for that public hearing.

Ron Deady, of 447 West Waterside Drive in Post Falls, suggested that a structure suited to the County's needs be placed in the space being used as a parking lot just beyond 627 Government Way instead. He provided sketches illustrating the location and the proposed building.

Commissioner Duncan informed the group that this location had been previously considered, but it was rejected due to the railroad tunnel underneath, making it unsuitable for building.

Mr. Deady replied that the tunnel could be braced so that it would support the weight of a building.

Jana Taylor, of 214 West Foster Ave in Coeur d'Alene, provided a PowerPoint presentation. She reminded the audience that the Board had previously rejected adding a third floor to the Courthouse building, at an estimated price of 1.2 million dollars, but had never given a reason for it.

Ms. Taylor suggested that the Annex Building be replaced with something larger. She stated that the Annex Building was unoccupied and was only used to house files.

Mr. Riley corrected her, stating that there were currently twelve full time employees and one-half time employee with offices in the Annex.

Ms. Taylor pointed out that the Sheriff's Office had a twenty-acre campus and there were eighty-five acres at the Fairgrounds that could be used for a new County building. She added that she did not think that the Probation Office exhibited a good use of space either and could be remodeled for extra office space. She suggested that the County sell the Romer Building and choose one of these other options.

Ms. Taylor informed the Commissioners that she owned the house next to the Romer Building and had been asking the City of Coeur d'Alene when and why her house had been changed to zoning C17L but had not received a reply. She pointed out that there were no other C17L parcels nearby. She concluded by stating she felt the County was guilty of "government overreach" in its actions, although she acknowledged that all its actions had been legal.

Commissioner Duncan commented that the one thing that would solve all the problems the County was experiencing was money. She reported that the Board had been given an estimated cost of about 45 million dollars to relocate all the County services next to the Jail or at the Fairgrounds.

Ms. Taylor responded that the County should do it in phases, to spread the cost out over a number of years. She said she thought the proposed plan would not satisfy the County's needs for even ten years and would cost much more in the end.

Commissioner Duncan asked if anyone present thought County residents would be willing to pay foregone taxes to fund an alternate plan. Ms. Taylor indicated she did not think that foregone taxes would be required if her suggested plan was completed in phases.

Commissioner Duncan explained that the Commissioners had reviewed the options Ms. Taylor had suggested and had eliminated them for different reasons.

Mr. Riley reported that commercial construction currently was \$290 or more per square foot at present. He said they were currently doing a space study, so he could not speak to the exact figures at this time, but that the County would need about 60,000 square feet to satisfy its current needs, without even considering including extra space for the future.

Ms. Taylor asked how the parking problems would be addressed. Commissioner Duncan informed her that the County paid for access to two hundred spaces across Northwest Boulevard. Ms. Taylor complained that no one ever parked there. Commissioner Duncan said that, starting next week, employees would not be permitted to park in the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicle) lot. She explained that, starting Monday, September 9, 2019, the DMV lot renovation would begin, with the swale in the center to be removed to provide more parking spaces. She reaffirmed that employees would be told to park elsewhere from that point on.

Ms. Taylor then expressed disbelief that the one third of an acre plot occupied by the Romer Building would cost the County \$425,000. Chairman Fillios explained that the County had already purchased the lot for that price.

Commissioner Duncan explained that, if the County were to sell the Romer Building, it would have to be offered as an open bid. She remarked that any buyer would be able to put anything allowed by zoning on the plot. She pointed out that a County building would be active only 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and would be closed on holidays. She noted that there was no guarantee that any other sort of business would have those restricted hours.

Ms. Taylor complained that prisoners would be present at the location, which was close to residences. Commissioner Duncan pointed out that prisoners were already present across the street, in the same capacity that they would be present at the new site.

Coeur d'Alene City Councilman Dan Gookin offered Ms. Taylor his card and said he would get back to her about her zoning question.

Dan Everheart stated that he was an outreach historian with the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office, located at 210 Main Street in Boise. He explained the mission of his agency and offered general support if the Board reconsidered their decisions. He reminded the Commissioners that Kootenai County had received grants of about \$150,000 from the agency over the last few decades, to help manage and maintain historic properties. He offered to provide information regarding the use of historic buildings upon request, and urged the preservation of the Romer Building.

Commissioner Duncan asked whether his agency would be willing to purchase the site. Mr. Everheart said that was doubtful, but not out of the question. He said he would leave his contact information and that the Executive Director and Board of his organization make all decisions about property acquisition.

Chairman Fillios inquired why action had not already been taken by his organization. Mr. Everheart replied that the property's owner must initiate any action to have a building placed on the historic registry. He said he was present at the request of the parties who requested the meeting.

Chairman Fillios reminded those present that the BOCC had twice attempted to have the building relocated and preserved. He said that it had been found to be too large to relocate.

Commissioner Duncan confirmed this and added that an out-of-state contractor had come to try to find a way to move it but had not been successful.

KiKi Miller, from 3555 Fernan Hill Road in Coeur d'Alene, stated she was a member of the Coeur d'Alene City Council. She pointed out that Coeur d'Alene did not have a historic preservation commission but that they were attempting to form one. She urged the Commissioners to consider other possibilities for the building. She stressed that many citizens were interested in preserving historic buildings.

ZoeAnn Thruman, from 509 West Spokane Avenue in Coeur d'Alene, restated several of the suggestions previously made and urged the Commissioners to listen to the over three hundred fifty-one signatures on the petition she submitted. She indicated that the demolition of the building would also demolish the citizens' respect and trust for their elected officials. She suggested that a think tank be created, composed of neighbors, developers, historians and County and City officials to discover a different way to satisfy the County's need for additional space.

Ms. Thruman reported she had received an email from Coeur d'Alene Mayor Steve Widmyer in support of her position and her request the Commissioners to delay any action. She added that she had been given permission by the Sheriff's Office to say that they would like to see the justice services centralized at their campus.

Chairman Fillios agreed that the citizens wishes needed to be taken into account, but pointed out that the Commissioners had a financial responsibility to the entire County. He asked how the BOCC could justify the \$425,000 already spent to the rest of the residents of Kootenai County if the building were not used as planned. He stated that the Board had to consider the best financial interests of the County.

Ms. Thruman stated she felt that a task force needed to be assembled to look into the fate of the building. She said that there were needs "outside of the bottom line" that had to be considered because this would affect the neighbors' quality of life and property values. She suggested that the building could be rented as is, to offset the expense of renting space for the Prosecutor's Office.

Chairman Fillios responded that the building could not be leased in its current condition. He reminded the audience that they had received an estimate predicting at least another \$200,000 would need to be spent to renovate the building to allow it to be used.

Ms. Thruman protested that the citizens had not acted sooner because they had not been made aware that the building in jeopardy. Chairman Fillios pointed out that all the meetings regarding the building had been open to the public over the past two years.

Commissioner Duncan repeated her point that, if the County tried to sell the building, they would be required to offer it to open bids. She commented that if a developer offered the highest bid and still wanted to tear it down, the County would not be able to prevent it. Ms. Thruman responded that the County should then keep the building to preserve it and find some other use for it, like opening it to tourists.

Commissioner Duncan stated that, in the Budget Meeting last week, citizens had indicated they did not want the County to spend tax dollars to provide any non-mandated services. She said that retaining the building unused would represent a non-mandated service, and creating a tourist venue would place the County inappropriately in competition with private industry.

Ms. Thruman strongly urged the Board to seek grant money from the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office and let the proposed task force take control of the building.

Dan Gookin, Coeur d'Alene City Councilman, 714 West Empire in Coeur d'Alene, reported that he had been asked by a citizen to research the zoning of the Romer Building to see if there were any restrictions on the plot's use. He said there were none. Mr. Gookin stated the property had been rezoned March 11, 1975 by the Planning Commission as C1AL; the zoning was updated by state requirement in 1986 and changed to C17L. He explained this meant it was a commercial zone of the highest intensity, with limitations intended to make the area transitional between residential and commercial uses. He added that only low impact commercial uses were permitted and that the original proposal had said it would be used as lawyers' offices. He assured Ms. Taylor that he would find out why her house had been zoned C17L also.

Mr. Gookin noted that the City's Comprehensive Plan, created in 2007, encouraged the preservation and protection of older, established neighborhoods. He said he felt strongly about this. He urged that the County build somewhere else, but if that were not possible that every effort be made to preserve the character of the neighborhood around the Romer Building.

Mr. Gookin commented that his neighborhood had a Neighborhood Compatibility Ordinance designed to protect the established character of a neighborhood and preventing buyers from tearing down a house and replacing it with something inappropriate to the area. He suggested that such an ordinance could be created for other areas in the City.

Glen Warriner, of 1011 East Bancroft Avenue in Coeur d'Alene, stated that he yielded his time to the next speaker.

Mark Johnstone, of 114 East Foster in Coeur d'Alene, stated he had previously been involved with historic preservation in California and in Idaho. He pointed out that one of the economic values and attractions of this area was the hundred-year-old homes. He suggested that tours of historic homes would be an attraction that would benefit the entire area financially.

Commissioner Duncan inquired whether Mr. Johnstone felt every hundred-year-old home should be preserved. He responded that when the community holds something valuable, it would find a way to protect it and the community apparently cared about this building.

Daryl Jorgenson, of 530 West Harrison Ave, Apartment 108, in Coeur d'Alene, stated he did not like what was going on. He listed a number of buildings and establishments that had vanished over the years and predicted that someday all that would be left would be a modern big city like Denver, Portland or Seattle. He urged that local history be protected.

Mr. Jorgenson recommended that the Board work with the Museum of North Idaho and arrange to transfer the Romer Building to them. He suggested they contact the manager, Dorothy Dalton, who could enlist the help of some of the many millionaires that live in the Coeur d'Alene to preserve the house.

Mary Ward, 2nd Street in Coeur d'Alene, asked how the County came to purchase the Romer Building. She said she never saw it go on the market and houses in that area sold for substantially more than \$425,000.

Chairman Fillios repeated that Mr. Brown had approached the County a number of years ago and offered the building. He said the County had accepted first right of refusal on the property and, about two years ago, the sale was completed. He stated that the property had not been listed, but that was the owner's privilege.

Ms. Ward said that, if the Board offered the property for sale, it might be bought by someone wanting to use it as a private residence and the County would surely get its money back.

Ms. Ward also asked that, if the building were to be demolished, as many of the mature trees be left as possible. Commissioner Duncan said that two of the trees were dying and would have to be taken down. She added that a third one would have to also be removed to allow construction, but the intent would be to keep as many trees as possible.

Ms. Ward asked how many stories tall the building the County planned to construct would be. Commissioner Duncan replied that the facilities study had not yet been completed, so she could not answer that.

Chairman Fillios commented that the current estimate was that the new building would be no more than four stories.

Mr. Braden pointed out that, as required by Idaho law, the County Commissioners did obtain an appraisal of the property before it was purchased and paid the fair market value. Chairman Fillios confirmed this.

Chairman Fillios noted that the idea of moving the justice services or the entire County administration to the Fairgrounds had been investigated and rejected due to the expense. As far as funding the move by selling the current County buildings, he reported that the BOCC had invited Steve Meyer of Parkwood Properties to set an approximate value on the buildings, which totaled approximately 130,000 square feet. He said Mr. Meyer had valued them at under 3.5 million dollars, with the explanation that a commercial developer would have to repurpose the buildings at great expense. Chairman Fillios observed that even if the estimate was low and the value was 6 million or even 9 million dollars, it would still not offset the expense of moving all County operations to the Fairgrounds.

Mary Ryan, of 711 North 8th Street in Coeur d'Alene, asked whether a person seeking to purchase the Romer Building for commercial purposes would be prevented from building something as large as the County could, because they would not have enough parking available.

Chairman Fillios said this was probably correct. He noted that such a developer would probably request a special use permit from the City. He agreed with Ms. Ryan's

observation that the County would not face such a limitation, because it already had sufficient parking available to service the site.

Ms. Ryan expressed her hope that, if a developer were allowed to buy the property, the house would have a chance of surviving.

Commissioner Duncan called attention to the copies of the “Permitted Uses; Special Use Permit” available to the audience that listed the different types of businesses allowed by the zoning. She remarked that it could include the proposed criminal transitional facility currently under discussion for Kootenai County.

Chad Taylor, of 214 West Foster Avenue in Coeur d’Alene, asked whether the parcel could be rezoned before offering it for sale. Commissioner Duncan replied that the City was in charge of zoning, not the County. He asked if the Mayor could do it. Commissioner Duncan said the process did not work like that.

Mr. Gookin explained that a special use permit would have to go to the Planning Commission for approval. He said there would then be a public hearing, with notices provided in the paper. Mr. Gookin said the issue would not go to the City Council unless it were appealed and that process would have to be initiated by the property’s owner.

Joseph Dreps, of Davis Park in Coeur d’Alene, expressed his opinion that the Romer Building was much prettier than any government office building would be. He said that the interior of the building could be repaired. He stated he did not like the changes he had seen in the County. Mr. Dreps said he particularly did not like the County, with its access to other land, putting their need for administrative space over the preservation of the prettiest corner of Government Way. He suggested the County use space at the Fairgrounds, next to the Jail, or out on the prairie.

Commissioner Duncan acknowledged that his suggestions might be preferable, but there was not enough money to do it. She said a bond would be required and there was no way a bond would be passed.

Mr. Dreps stated that he did not mind paying his fair share of taxes, but he felt the money was not being spent wisely at any level of government. He voiced his opinion that the Romer Building was inherently beautiful and should be preserved.

Chairman Fillios thanked everyone for attending and said that the Board would consider all the input received.

E. Adjournment (Action): Chairman Fillios adjourned the meeting at 5:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

JIM BRANNON, CLERK

CHRIS FILLIOS, CHAIRMAN

BY: _____
Tina Ginorio, Deputy Clerk
