

Committee gives boost to coalmining museum in LC

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Anderson County Commissioner Tim Isbel (Dist. 4) is spearheading the movement to bring a coalmining museum to downtown Lake City.

The plan picked up a major boost at last week's Operations Committee meeting and will face it's most important test yet when presented before the county's legislative body at the Monday's Aug. 19 Commission meeting.

The Operations Committee on Monday evening, Aug. 12, voted to purchase the 25-year-old Bank of America building - located in the heart of Lake City at 211 S. Main Street - for the purpose of converting the structure into Tennessee's largest and most authentic coalminers museum.

Since being elected commissioner in 2010 Isbel has worked closely with Lake City officials on finding avenues toward creating economic

growth through new retail or tourism revenues. He's faced his share of challenges along the way and his latest venture, though widely supported, has seen its ups and downs.

"This is a project that a lot of people believe in and want to see happen and I think it's gong to happen," said Isbel, "but it has been a rollercoaster ride. We've faced a lot of challenges along the way. I credit this community for its resiliency over the years in not letting this project slip away."

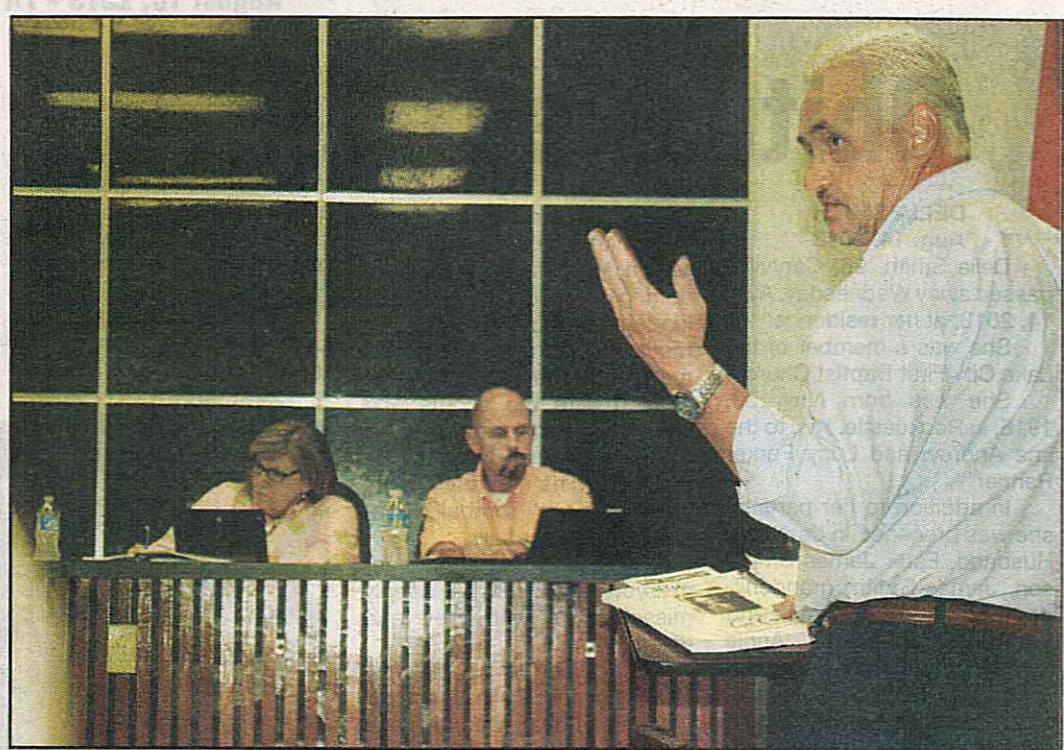
The motion to purchase the building was made by Dist. 5 Commissioner Robert McKamey and seconded by Isbel's fellow Lake City Commissioner, Zach Bates.

McKamey's motion calls for the county to purchase the Bank of America building for a sum of \$100,000. The funds to purchase the building derive from approximately \$303,000 generated from

the sell of around 27 acres of land in Heiskell's bustling David Jones Industrial Park. The Operations Committee voted Monday night to put the remaining \$203,000 netted from the land sell in an Anderson County Economic Development Association reserve fund for future industrial projects.

Operations Committee members voting in favor of the motion included McKamey, Bates, Dist. 7 Commissioner Jerry Creasey, Dist. 3 Commissioner Steve Emert and Dist. 1 Commissioner Tracy Wandell.

With the backing of a host of Lake City officials, including Mayor Tim Sharp, as well as Anderson County Tourism Director Stephanie Wells, Isbel outlined for the committee his vision to translate the area's rich history as a one-time coalmining Mecca into a



Dist. 4 Commissioner Tim Isbel explains to members of County Commission's Operations Commission (Committee Chairperson Robin Biloski and Dist. 3 Commissioner Steve Emert are pictured) how a Coalminers Museum could be a huge economic boost for Lake City as well as for Anderson County. — Chris Silcox

Boost

from 1A

modern day tourist attraction that would ideally usher an economic resurgence for the financially strapped town.

The concept of opening a coalmining museum in Lake City, however, is by no means a novel idea. In fact, others have tried and others have failed.

More than a decade ago a group of Lake City officials hatched a plan to construct a multi-million dollar facility that would have housed a proposed 39,000-square-foot museum near the same site as the current museum proposal. That venture never materialized past the planning stages.

Critics of the current plan question whether there is even enough support in Lake City to warrant such an investment from the county.

"There's a significant difference between the former museum proposal and the plan we're working on now," Isbel argued. "For one thing we've downsized it a great deal so a big thing is it's going to be much less expensive to open it and then to operate it."

Isbel points out that initial plans are for the museum experience to include a guided tour of the historic Briceville United Methodist Church, which played an important role in the area's coalmining history, as well as various other interactive exhibits. Preliminary discussions are in the works for the museum to feature a first-of-its-kind Coal Miners Hall of Fame that would feature not only some of the heroes from the storied coalmining history in this area but also other noted miners who made a significant impact on the industry.

The proposed coalmining museum has reportedly gained the backing of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, an active non-profit organization based in Knoxville focused on improving the quality of life in the Coal Creek Watershed.

Isbel stated this week that the local support of this project has been overwhelming. It's that continued investment from the Lake City and Briceville communities, however, that make some of the project's naysayers wary.

Dist. 6 Commissioner Whitey Hitchcock has seen this movie before and says indications lead him to believe it could feature very similar ending. While he's always supported the concept, Hitchcock says he wants to see more of an investment from Lake City before he'll back it with a vote.

"I've been supporting this for quite sometime," Hitchcock commented. "We talked about it 20 years ago. It's always been kind of an up-and-



Dist. 1 Commissioner Tracy Wandell browses a brochure detailing some of the artifacts that would be included in the proposed Lake City Coalminers Museum. — Chris Silcox

down kind of thing involving different individuals leading the charge and that's always the case when you're getting something off the ground and leadership changes, but I would be more inclined to say (a \$50,000 investment from the county) with the city also having that investment... because if you're not making the investment then I don't see the commitment to making it happen."

Anderson County Mayor Terry Frank agreed with Hitchcock.

A coalminer's daughter, Frank says she supports the concept but is hesitant to commit \$100,000 to the plan. She recommended for the Tourism Counsel to purchase the building out if its reserve funding, which was reported to be around \$150,000.

Wells replied that she would take the Mayor's suggestion to the Tourism Board, but the Board's next meeting is not until late September.

McKamey reminded the committee that this project would likely not wait until late September. He stated that county government should go ahead and purchase the building before someone else takes it off the market.

"The main thing is we need to purchase the building," said McKamey. "This is money that we didn't even know we had a month ago. If something happens and the muse-

um doesn't work out we'll still have the building, and that property is worth a lot more than the asking price. To me this is a no-brainer."

Wandell concurred, urging his fellow commissioners to simply do what's best for the people of Lake City and that community instead of analyzing the situation until the opportunity doesn't exist.

"Sometimes you do things because it just makes sense," Wandell commented. "Listen, we're all grown men and women sitting around this table, so let's vote. Vote your conscience. No is no and yes is yes. If you can't make a decision then abstain. Let's vote."

Operations Committee Chairperson Robin Biloski (Dist. 8) and Hitchcock were the only commissioners to vote against the motion to purchase the bank building.

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