

# Petition prompts board to revisit LEC project

*Anti-LEC petition presented to county commissioners sparks conversation about project's future, County board will host special meeting in March to review project, hear from public*

By Amy Chaffins  
News Editor

A thick stack of papers overflowing with more than 500 signatures has prompted Pope County Commissioners to take another look at plans for construction of a \$3.4 million law enforcement center.

The petition, which reads: "We the undersigned property taxpayers of Pope County respectfully request the Pope County Board of Commissioners to reverse their decision on building a Law Enforcement Center. As taxpayers, we feel due to budget and economic problems, this is not the time to do a project of this size and cost," was presented to the county by Glenwood residents Wayne and Sheila Beckwith.

"There are too many people losing their jobs and losing their houses," Sheila said. "This isn't the time to build a multi-million dollar law enforcement center."

The Beckwiths said they placed copies of the petition at several businesses across the county and collected about 560 signatures in two weeks.

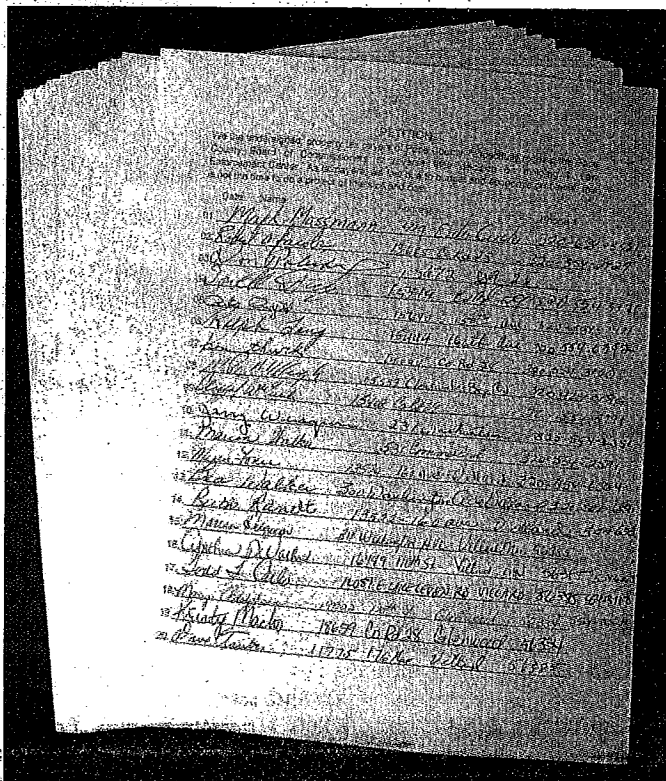


Photo by Amy Chaffins

**A petition with 560 signatures asks the Pope County Board to reverse its decision to build a new law enforcement center. The petition was recently presented to commissioners.**

"There were people out there who didn't even know a [LEC] was going to be built," Sheila said.

"I'm just tired of the government spending," Wayne said. "I'd like some new equipment, but no one's going to buy it for me. This spending has to come to a halt, especially now."

During their board meeting Tuesday, Pope County Commissioners Randy Shaw, Paul Gerde and Gordy Wagner directed county staff to plan for a special meeting in March that will provide an historical overview of the decisions that led to the LEC project approval, plus, the public will likely have an opportunity to voice their opinions during the meeting.

"The sooner the better," Commissioner Gerde said. "There are a lot of feelings on this in the county so let's bring it to a head and see what's going on."

"I'd like to see any designs that have been presented so we can see what it looks like," Gerde said. "We've been asked to stop [the LEC project] and we don't know what we're voting on."

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### Background on the LEC project

In November, Pope County Commissioners authorized the Pope County Housing and Redevelopment Authority to proceed with a \$3.4 million funding package for a new law enforcement center (LEC).

Commissioner Randy Shaw voted against it, saying he'd like to wait for some sign of economic stability.

The county's HRA will act as a financial conduit for the county.

Plans are for the 10,000 square foot LEC to be located on nine acres of land that the county owns between State Highways 55 and 29, just east of Midwest Machinery-John Deere, north of Glenwood city limits.

The LEC will not be a jail, rather a 48-hour holding facility, according to Pope County Sheriff Tom Larson.

No action has been taken on the project since the county HRA bonded for the LEC funding. After Tuesday's meeting, Pope County Coordinator Riaz Aziz said, "We'll put together the presentation and based on what the commissioners' direction is, [county staff will] shape and mold the [LEC] plan and go from there."

\$1.2 million in bonds and capital notes with the new LEC construction bond.

The "wrap around" option also lets the county defer the LEC's principal payments until 2013 - that's when the existing debt will be paid in full. After 2013, if the county doesn't add more debt, property taxes will decrease.

The county will lease the LEC from the HRA for 20 years and the HRA will then transfer ownership to the county.

### Comments about special meeting, petition

It's up to the county board to determine if, and how much, input will be taken from the public during the special meeting next month.

Gerde said, "I think the people have a right to know everything possible they can know, but I think we ought to pack a lunch that day."

Wagner said, "I don't like to undo work the previous board has done, I hate to come in and rip up everything they've done, but maybe the economy is driving strange circumstances."

"Maybe Douglas and Stevens Counties will get into a bidding war to take our prisoners," he added. The two neighboring counties have plans to build jails.

A special election for the District 4 county commissioner vacancy will be held March 10.

### Other business

The board also conducted the following business:

- Met new county employee Amanda Johnson. Johnson is the county's new Adult Mental Health/Special Needs Basic Care Social Worker in the Human Services department.

- Discussed a petition that the county board received from citizens against the new law enforcement center project going forward now.

- Approved official proceedings from the January 20 meeting.

- Approved Judy Anderson to fill the vacant position on the Pope County Planning Commission and Board of Adjustment for District 2. Commissioner Wagner reportedly recommended Anderson for the three-year term.

- Approved Courtney Engelbretson to serve an additional three years representing District 4 on the Pope County Planning Commission and Board of Adjustment.

- Approved the On Sale 3.2 Beer License renewal for Rodina Golf Course.

- Approved payment of bills totaling \$49,847.27

### LEC details

Commissioners have yet to finalize construction details, but as of now, there are plans to build a 10,842 square foot facility which includes space for: the Pope County Sheriff's Office, three holding cells, a conference room, evidence storage, employee lockers and break room, dispatch center, a sally port and other storage areas.

Part of the construction cost also includes \$400,000 to cover costs for additional county storage and water and sewer that will run along County Road 50 - the new road that will connect Highways 55 and 29 and run in front of the new LEC.

The overall plans for the LEC allows for future expansion to include jail and courts facilities, if future county leaders choose to add on to the LEC.

### Project cost & financing

Over 20 years, the \$3.4 million LEC bond will actually cost taxpayers about \$5.4 million - that includes \$2 million in interest.

The county board chose to use the "wrap around" financing option. This allows the county to wrap its existing debt of

Sheriff Larson said it was hard for him to hear about misinformation being distributed along with the petition.

"Some people were told that their taxes were going to double - how is that possible? Even if we did the whole [LEC] project in one year, it wouldn't double people's property taxes," Larson said. "If people fully understood prior to the petition, they probably wouldn't have signed it." He said he's always encouraged residents to contact him with any questions they may have had about the LEC.

"It's really frustrating for me after the five years of planning that went into this," Larson said.

"I'm glad the new board wants an overview presentation," Larson added, "but the only problem I see is that contractors' bids are coming in way under our estimation and I worry that [the LEC project] is going to cost more [if it's delayed]."

The county board's special meeting will likely be scheduled for the second week of March to allow for the District 4 commissioner-elect to also attend.

which includes payments of: \$525 to Association of Minnesota Counties for three new commissioner conference registrations - Wagner, Gerde, Aziz; \$1,354 to Minnesota County Attorneys Association for 2009 dues; \$348.31 to Hilltop Lumber for miscellaneous county building maintenance; \$857.50 to Glacial Ridge Health System for seven medical bags for oxygen storage for the sheriff's office; \$4,000 to West Central Minnesota Narcotics Task Force dues; \$1,705 to Todd County Sheriff's Office for prisoner room and board; \$90 to Andrea Anastasi for interpreter services for court; \$576.23 to Interstate Power Systems Inc. for generator service contract; and \$3,492.03 to Marco Inc. for copier contract.

• Commissioner Larry Kittelson did not attend Tuesday's meeting.

The Pope County Board of Commissioners will meet for its Committee of the Whole meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 10, at 9 a.m., and regular meeting Tuesday, Feb. 17, at 9 a.m. in the county board meeting room at the courthouse.