

Ideas offered on county seat move

By Kathleen Utz, In Focus

The successful petition drive to move the Benton County seat from Prosser to Kennewick does more than put the issue on the ballot.

It also requires county commissioners to issue a financial impact statement at least 60 days before the Nov. 2 election.

Probable costs associated with relocating the county seat and the financial impact to the communities involved must be included in the report so voters can make an informed choice.

The commissioners recently voted to hire a consultant to assist them with this effort.

The League of Women Voters of Benton-Franklin Counties has closely followed the issue and has some recommendations on how to proceed.

First, commissioners should hire a consultant with a proven track record for public outreach and communication.

He or she also should be experienced in performing this type of economic analysis and be ready to review all pertinent documentation. This would include the league's 2006-07 study of this issue, which contains statistical, legal and historical information.

The league also recommends the consultant come from outside of Benton and Franklin counties to avoid any conflict of interest.

And in accordance with the League of Women Voters' policy regarding transparency in government, we're urging our county commissioners to appoint a citizen's task force to assist the consultant with data gathering and to provide a balanced viewpoint.

The offices of the assessor, auditor, treasurer, Superior Court and District Court should be represented on the task force. City councils serving the communities that would be most affected by moving the county seat also should be represented. The Prosser Chamber of Commerce, Tri-Cities Regional Chamber of Commerce and other civic organizations should be considered as well.

The group should be small enough to work efficiently within a very limited time frame. A dedicated group of volunteers combined with the efforts of a consultant will best be able to achieve the goal of creating a timely and meaningful analysis.

Taxpayers pay for the maintenance and operation of county facilities. A clear understanding of the probable financial impact of moving the county seat must be communicated in a meaningful and comprehensive way if a thoughtful decision is expected of the voters.

Having a diverse group representing the varied interests of the county ensures that the community is regularly informed of key findings and opportunities for input.

The scope of the report is twofold: determine the financial impact of moving the county seat if the ballot issue passes, and determine the financial impact should the county seat remain in Prosser.

It is our understanding that construction is planned for a new administration building in Kennewick to house the auditor, treasurer and assessor, regardless of where the county seat is located.

Since it already has been determined that there is a need for these services in the Tri-Cities, this expense should not be included in the cost analysis concerning a potential change in location of the county seat.

The league has a wealth of background material acquired and used during the process of studying this issue and we would be happy to share the information with the consultant, the task force and the public.

Please refer to tinyurl.com/countyseat for a copy of the 2006-07 League of Women Voters study on the location of the county seat.

* Kathleen Utz is a member of the county seat study committee for the League of Women Voters of Benton and Franklin Counties.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/04/25/991464/ideas-offered-on-county-seat-move.html#ixzz0mKNH8JPJ>