Talking Points

Illinois county news & views

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Manar named new Chief of Staff

Macoupin County Board Chairman Andrew Manar has been named the new Chief of Staff under Senate President John Cullerton. He previously served as Director of Policy and Budget for the Senate Democrats. Manar, 33, graduated from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville with a major in History. His experience includes working for the late state Senator Vince Demuzio and managing Senator Deanna Demuzio's campaign.

Lee County creates safety committee

Lee County has created a new safety committee in order to prevent accidents at county worksites and avoid lawsuits resulting from such accidents. The county's insurance provider works through CIRMA, a risk management program owned and managed by Illinois counties. Training is the main goal of the program and, "most of the time that's all that is required to prevent accidents from happening," according to Lee County Board member John Ferrone. The committee's duties include revision of a "boilerplate" safety manual supplied by CIRMA.

Shelby County to upgrade jail security system

In a narrow 11-10 vote, the Shelby County Board approved the proposal for a $130,000 electronic control panel system for the county jail. It will operate cell doors and record all radio transmissions and phone conversations. The law enforcement committee approved the spending before the official approval of the county board, however the county board affirmed the decision made by the committee.

Peoria approves sales tax referendum

The Peoria County Board approved placing a referendum on April ballot asking voters to raise the county's sales tax rate by 1/4 of 1% to help fund public facilities. If approved by the electorate, the sales tax increase would be the equivalent of twenty-five cents for every $100 purchased. The referendum includes a sunset clause setting the tax increase to expire twenty (20) years from its effective date of January 1, 2010. Money collected from the increase would be used to help fund construction of the Peoria Riverfront Museum.

Menard County seeks to enhance 911 system

The Menard County Emergency Medical Services is seeking to enhance their current 911 calling system to aid police, paramedics, firefighters, and other emergency responders. The original E-911 program was implemented about a year ago but the new administrator of the County Emergency Medical Services looks to enhance the system with additional data including mapping the location of fire hydrants along with automatic external defibrillators. The five-year project began in 2002 with an approval from Menard County voters to implement a $3.25 surcharge on their landline phone bill.

Macon County eyes self-insurance

The Macon County Board Finance Committee is proposing a resolution to earmark a $57,093 health insurance surplus for a hospitalization reserve, moving them closer to a county run health insurance program. An auditor for the county stated that with the 600 county employees it puts Macon on the borderline between large and small organizations to make self-insurance cost-effective. The surplus came from charging county departments the projected average for health insurance costs during the previous fiscal year.

Sales tax lawsuit tossed out

A lawsuit filed by P&S Grain LLC and V.W. Bowman Oil Co. against the Williamson County Board was tossed out by Judge John Speroni. The lawsuit aimed to stop the collection of a 1 percent sales tax for school construction approved by voters last February. In his ruling, Speroni said the plaintiffs did not have standing as taxpayers to bring the lawsuit before the court. Neither plaintiff is a voter in the county. The plaintiffs can appeal the ruling.

Morgan County to lose large employer

The ACH Food Company will be closing their plants in Jacksonville and Champaign in the coming months resulting in the loss of 450 central Illinois jobs. The ACH plant was opened in 1952 under the name Mrs. Tucker Shortening. According to a company statement, employees will be given at least 60 days notice before being let go. The ACH plant is one of Morgan County's largest employers.

Macoupin considers wind turbines

In order to diversify their economic base, Macoupin County is considering installing wind turbines. The northwestern section of the county is a potential spot for the project recommended by a Western Illinois University study. The county installed a 165 foot meteorological tower over 12-16 months measuring wind velocity and the data showed a viable location near Modesto, Illinois. The wind turbine project will diversify the county's economic base which is mainly focused on coal, ethanol, and tourism.

Kankakee County considering feral cat colonies

Kankakee County Board member Ann Bernard has introduced a plan to curb the number of feral cats in the county. The management program aims to establish feral cat colonies in unincorporated areas of the county that would be supervised by a caretaker. Each colony would be sponsored by an animal shelter or humane society. Critics argue that managing cats is not that simple and it could add a burden to the county as colony cats would have to be spayed or neutered and micro-chipped by a licensed veterinarian. There is no funding provided in the ordinance. The proposal is before the Community Service Committee.

County board to decide fate of old courthouse

The old Effingham County Courthouse could be turned into a museum. The county has applied for an Illinois Transportation Enhancement Grant that would secure a large percentage of the funds needed for converting the courthouse into a museum. An additional 20 percent would have to come from local sources. County officials would like to see plans for the courthouse finalized by July. Some favor tearing down the 137-year-old building and making a parking lot. The county board will ultimately make the final decision.

Crawford approves animal contract pact

The Crawford County board approved a new contract for animal control with the Crawford County Humane Society. Under the three-year contract, the Society will receive $33,000 this year, up from $25,750 per year, with a five percent increase for each of the next two years. The contract hit a snag when a disagreement arose over whether the society was required to pick up strays in the unincorporated areas of the county only versus in addition to incorporated areas of municipalities. Local municipalities balked at paying additional fees for animal pick up. The society agreed to pick up animals in all areas of the county.

Madison County reaffirms commitment to mentally ill

Following the settlement of a lawsuit filed against the county on behalf of 11 residents of the Shelter Care Home, Madison County officials closed the facility February 6 and have set aside transition funding in the amount of $550,000 each year for 15 years to assist the residents for any services they require that are not paid by state and federal sources. The money is earmarked to support the new Chestnut Health assisted living center proposed for Collinsville. The county also committed to continuing its support for the Madison County Mental Health Board and the Community Development Department, both of which work in support of the county' mentally ill and developmentally disabled citizens. Closing the Shelter Care Home will save county taxpayers almost a million dollars a year in annual expenses.

McHenry County Chairman sues state liquor commission

The Illinois Liquor Control Commission has reinstated a gas station's license to sell liquor after the McHenry County Chairman revoked it. The same gas station employee had been caught three times from December 2007 to July 2008 selling alcohol to minors. The gas station was fined $1,000 dollars for the first offense, $1,500 for the second, and the license was revoked with the third offense. The Illinois Liquor Control Commission has stated the county did not follow a progressive discipline plan. The Chairman is asking the McHenry County court to uphold his decision to revoke the license.

Iroquois County tries night meetings

The Iroquois County Board has switched to night meetings temporarily in response to citizens who say that morning meetings discourage election candidates and public participation. Iroquois County Board Chairman Ron Schroeder announced he is not in favor of night meetings but is willing to allow them on a trial basis. The county board as a whole will decide in March whether or not to continue the night meetings.

DeKalb County rehires lobbying firm

DeKalb County has rehired its Washington D.C. lobbying firm, after cutting them out of the 2009 budget in order to reduce costs. With the new economic stimulus package looming, the county decided to hire back the lobbying firm at a rate of $4,000 dollars a month down from $7,500. Funding for the firm will likely come from the county's opportunity fund.

Vermilion prepares for changing energy market

Vermilion County board members have approved a new wind ordinance. Since the county does not have zoning, the ordinance compensates by creating a building-permit format that oversees companies looking to build in the county. The ordinance sets several rules for wind farms including the permit process, road care during the construction phase and buffer zones between the turbines and adjacent properties. At least three companies have approached Vermilion County about the potential for wind farms.

DeWitt County Museum obtains mural grant

The DeWitt County Museum is the recipient of a grant for a mural that is to be painted depicting Abraham Lincoln's journeys in DeWitt County. According to the museum curator, Karl Smith of Normal and Sally Walsh of Farmer City have been commissioned to create the painting. The mural will go on display in the spring as part of the 200th anniversary celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

Getting caught with a hooker could get expensive

A proposal before the Cook County Board would make picking up a prostitute no longer a criminal offense. "Johns" would instead face fines up to $1,000 along with impounding of their vehicles and 100 hours of community service. The proposed county public morals nuisance ordinance has the support of Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart who says current charges of a $100 fine and 2-hour class do not deter repeat offenders. Police would have a choice of charging the offender under the new ordinance or current misdemeanor charge.

Morgan County begins courthouse renovation

County commissioners are moving forward on renovations to the historic Morgan County Courthouse. The commissioners are calling for bids to replace the old asphalt shingle roof with new slate and copper flashing, remove and replace deteriorated stone banding, remove and replace portions of the wood exterior trim, and repair of wood dormers, among other items. It is anticipated the initial work will cost around $1 million.

County-owned farm for sale

Boone County board members have put 38 acres of county-owned farmland up for sale. The money raised from the sale of the farm will help fund a courthouse expansion. The county plans to purchase 4.8 acres adjacent to the county Health Department in order to build a 12,000 square-feet addition to the facility. Bond proceeds will be used to fund a portion of the expansion project which is estimated to cost about $5.2 million.

Sangamon County saves big with new severance plan

A voluntary severance plan offered to employees will save Sangamon County more than $1 million annually. Forty-five employees have opted to take the package. Those workers will receive one week's salary for every two years of service with the county, up to 25 years. Employees also have the option of a one-time insurance payout of $4,000. The county will refrain from filling the vacated positions for at least six months, after which any new hires for those positions can be paid no more than 60% of the previous employees' salaries.

Jefferson County to market coal

Jefferson County has entered into an agreement with Energy Plus to market around 7,000 acres of coal rights in the county. According to Jefferson County Chairman Ted Buck there is no up-front costs and if a buyer is brought to the table the board will still have a vote to determine whether or not to accept the given proposal.

Hospital renovation approved

Mercer County Hospital has received approval from the Illinois Facilities Planning Board to go-ahead with the 10.5 million in renovations they proposed. It will be switched to single-patient care rooms and expand out-patient services. The project will likely start in late spring or early summer and is expected to take about 18 months to complete.

Rural Electric Co-op erects wind turbine near Springfield

The Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative of Auburn has erected a wind turbine south of Springfield in Farmersville. The co-op has around 5,500 members in Montgomery, Morgan, Sangamon, Macoupin, and Christian counties. The "gob knob," as the wind turbine is known, is erected on the site of the old Freeman United Mine that operated there from 1951 to 1971. The turbine will supply power for about 300 homes. It was purchased through a series of federal and state grants along with zero-interest clean energy bonds for 1.8 million dollars.

Mason County sues city over Com-Tower

The Mason County Emergency Telephone System Board has filed a lawsuit against the city of Havana for not allowing them to construct a communications tower that would provide greater emergency services in the county. The city states that any structure over 100-feet is a zoning violation. However, a zoning variance could allow for the tower to be erected.

County approves referendums for road repair

The Fulton County Board approved two referendums to be placed on the April ballot to help fund county road repairs. If approved by voters taxes paid for county highways will increase from 7.65 cents to 20 cents per $100 of equalized assessed valuation. The second referendum would impose a new five-year tax of 8.33 cents which would generate about $750,000 a year to fund maintenance programs such as chip-sealing. The county's monthly allotment from the motor fuel tax is down about 28 percent.

Kane shifts 911 costs to municipalities

Kane County has decided to shift the costs of the KaneComm emergency dispatch services to the communities it serves. They will charge a membership fee along with a fee that depends on the number of calls a community generates. The county plans to phase in the increase to the municipalities over the next three years.

LaSalle considers towing fee

The LaSalle County Board is considering enacting a towing fee for individuals charged with drunk driving. The fee would be in addition to the towing companies fee and would be enforced at the impound when a person goes to pick up the car. The towing fee will only be applied when police are needed at the scene and not imposed on individuals requiring a standard tow.

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