SENIOR CENTER SUPPORTERS: DAILY PROGRAMMING GOES BEYOND MEALS

April 4, 2019

Supporters in the community for keeping the Jack Sullivan Senior Citizens Center just as it is have a message for the Switzerland County Commissioners: it’s more than a building, for many of the county’s senior citizens, it’s a home where family gathers.

The county has been closely watching the situation with the building since the commissioners announced their intentions to accept proposals for the possibility of getting rid of the building — either by sale or by giving it away to a non-profit or some other entity.

For the county, having the building seems to be a luxury that can be done without — with the commissioners noting that should they get rid of the building, their intentions are to relocate the Senior Meal site to the Switzerland County TEC Center. The commissioners were also open to the possibility that the new owner might choose to allow the senior meal site to stay where it is.

But for supporters of the building remaining in county hands as a senior center, they want people to know that there’s a lot more going on there than just serving some meals.

“I just want the community to know the facts of the situation,” advocate Debbie Allen said. “My parents owned the property, and when they sold the property in April of 1998, it was supposed to be for a senior center, and that’s what this community has always known it as — a place for seniors to get together and give them some quality of life and some importance and feel good about themselves and want to get out and be active and stay active as long as they can.”

Allen said that the “Catch-A-Ride” program provides seniors with transportation to and from the center just 50-cents, while others drive themselves.

“They make a donation if they can for their hot meal,” Allen said of the seniors using the facility. “And there are many activities. It’s not just ‘go there and sit and have a meal’. That’s what the community thinks it is and that’s all they do there, and it’s not.”

Allen provided a list of groups and organizations that provide programming for seniors at the Center.

• Purdue Extension comes every Tuesday and discusses healthy cooking recipes and lifestyles.

• Swiss Villa provides a hot meal on the last Thursday of each month; on the second Tuesday of the month they play bingo; and on the third Tuesday of the month the representative plans ‘focus groups’ to work on individual needs.
• Ruth Lohide and Maxine Meisberger of Switzerland County Farm Bureau, Inc., organize bingo games with prizes four times each year.

• The Riverview Homemakers Club plans holiday parties for the seniors at the Center, providing a snack, a craft, and games and prizes.

• Highpoint Health comes on the last Tuesday of each month, where a nurse checks blood pressures, heart rates, diabetic levels, and other health screenings.

• On the third Tuesday of each month, a representative from LifeTime Resources gives a health class at the Center; as well as being the coordinating organization providing noon meals each day.

• Every Tuesday other seniors come to play cards from noon until 2 p.m. for fellowship.

Allen said that LifeTime Resources has also pledged—if the Senior Center remains open—to provide an additional resource person here to assist in scheduling other services, from helping with appointments to counseling services and more.

The mealsite itself is coordinated daily by Debbie Cox, who provides all types of assistance to seniors as well as providing the meal.

“That’s how I got connected with it, through my homemakers club, the Riverview Homemakers,” Allen said. “We were looking for some community project, and Debbie Cox had approached me about the homemakers coming in and doing something once a quarter, or as often as we can, So we go there for holidays, usually four to six times a year.”

Allen said that, like all places, the number of people at the Center can vary from day to day, but notes that attendance increases when the meals are paired with some sort of programming.

“When we come, they have maybe 16-18 seniors,” she said. “Because they know what we do and they like what we do, and it’s a good day for them.”

Allen said that traditionally Thursdays see the highest attendance, but with things like the weather and doctor’s appointments and other things, the numbers can go up and down daily.

“That’s just life, you’re not going to have a full house every day,” Allen said. “I just don’t know that if they take this facility away from them, how many will continue to go somewhere else. I know how my mom and dad have been, I know how other seniors are. They get set in their ways and they are comfortable. They like where they are. They don’t like change. They don’t like getting used to a new place.

“That has been my passion,” Allen continued. “Why disrupt their lives for three commissioners?”

Allen said that although the Center has been cared for by Larry Perlich, who oversaw the facility full time; with volunteers willing to step up and help, there wouldn’t be the need for the expense of hiring a fulltime person, which would greatly cut down on the building’s expense to the county.

“There’s enough people in the community who will step up and volunteer to do what needs to be done if that’s the breaking point,” Allen said. “If it’s paying another person or asking for volunteers, you can save all that money.”

But the physical upkeep and costs such as utilities would have to remain with the county, but the overall expenses would be reduced, as the salary was over half of the total county budget for a year.

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At Monday’s meeting of the Commissioners, five proposals were announced. The commissioners said that they would go over the proposals in an executive session to narrow down the list; and then hold meetings with proposal finalists before making a decision—or before deciding to continue to maintain ownership of the building and continue programming as it currently exists.

Specific details of the proposals were not available, but the five applicants include:

• Jeff-Craig Fire and Rescue.

• The Town of Vevay
• Switzerland County Tourism

• Vevay VFW Post #5396

• Rick Daugherty representing Lattice Biologicals

Should the commissioners decide to accept one of the proposals, and if that proposal did not include the senior center remaining there, the commissioners would first look to move the mealsite and programming to the Switzerland County TEC Center — which in their view makes better use of the county’s other public building.

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Also in discussion regarding the building is the role — if any — that the Paul Ogle Foundation in Jeffersonville, Indiana, would play in this decision. The Paul Ogle Foundation gave the matching funds to the county to get the grant to build the building with the stipulation that Jack Sullivan’s name would be on it. Sullivan was a longtime pharmacist in Vevay and a strong community leader who served for many years as this county’s representative to the Paul Ogle Foundation.

Allen said that she had checked with the foundation, but that she was told that the grant was so long ago any covenants or restrictions on the money or the building would have expired by now.

“There’s just a lot of things to consider — except money,” Allen said. “To me, yes, it’s $40,000 or $50,000, but really, is that that much money for the total number of seniors who are here, for the good of the community? There’s a person who comes there, he’s over 100 years old. There’s a man who rides around on a little scooter here in town, he comes everyday. It’s people who have standing in the community who have paid into this community. I think there’s over 1,200 people in the community who are over 65.”

Allen acknowledges that the activities at the Center need to be better marketed to the community in terms of what’s going on and when; as well as letting people know that the building is also for rent for private activities from family reunions to wedding and baby showers to parties.

“Hopefully this will get exposure out there,” she said. “They brought in $3,000 or so from parties and showers and events. The Historical Society is going to have an event over there in September. The commissioners say, ‘We’ve got two buildings like that, but with all of the programming going on, you need two buildings.’”

Allen said that the TEC Building is being booked almost every weekend; and there are also meetings and seminars and other events that go on throughout the week that would be impacted if the mealsite and senior activities were moved there. She also fears that the seniors would be moved around as other activities happened in the TEC Center rooms, which would also cause more stress on seniors wanting to come and take advantage of the programming.

“If they have morning meetings up until 1:30 p.m., they would have to move around,” Allen said. “Someone said to just put them in one of the computer labs, but you don’t know if they could do that, and you’re just moving them around all the time. They’d have to move around, or they might just cancel things all together. I can see them saying, ‘you just can’t be here today’. Yes, they will find them a place, but will it be a stable place? A consistent place?”

Allen acknowledges that the building may not be turning a profit, but says that there should more to consider than just how much money the county can make — because the senior citizens of this county deserve to be taken care of.

“I asked Josh (County Commissioner Josh South), if you sell the building, what will you use the money for?”, Allen said. “He said maintenance to the courthouse and to the TEC building. You’re going to have that anyway.”

There are times, she notes, that there should be services without regard to profits.

“The seniors want to enjoy a place that they can be together for these programs and hopefully many others,” Allen said. “The building also provides the community a meeting room for many parties, events, and programs. Jack Sullivan had a vision for the senior community, and may his memory continue to live on in Switzerland County.”