

County sheriff's union turns down commissioners' final wage offer

by Evelyn Pyburn

BILLINGS – Both options of the county commissioners' "last, best and final" offer to the Yellowstone County Sheriffs deputies were unanimously rejected by the union members.

Commissioner Jim Reno, who has been part of the county's negotiating team, expressed surprise at the outcome.

The deputies filed a request with the Board of Personnel Appeals for a fact finder to review the case, in an effort to move negotiations forward.

During the fact-finding process, the union cannot strike.

Having been rejected, the commissioners have withdrawn both the options they put forward two weeks ago in the hope of ending the drawn-out negotiations, which have extended a quarter-way into the year and have involved seven meetings, including two mediation sessions.

The "main financial package" has been settled upon, dictated primarily by state law that ties deputies' wage increases to that of the sheriff.

Deputies will receive a 4.1 percent net increase in wages, which was implemented at the beginning of the fiscal year, July 1. Also included are increases to uniform allowances. According to the county director of finance, total financial increases for the deputies' compensation amount to 5.13 percent.

Commissioner John Ostlund said that is a higher package than any other group has negotiated.

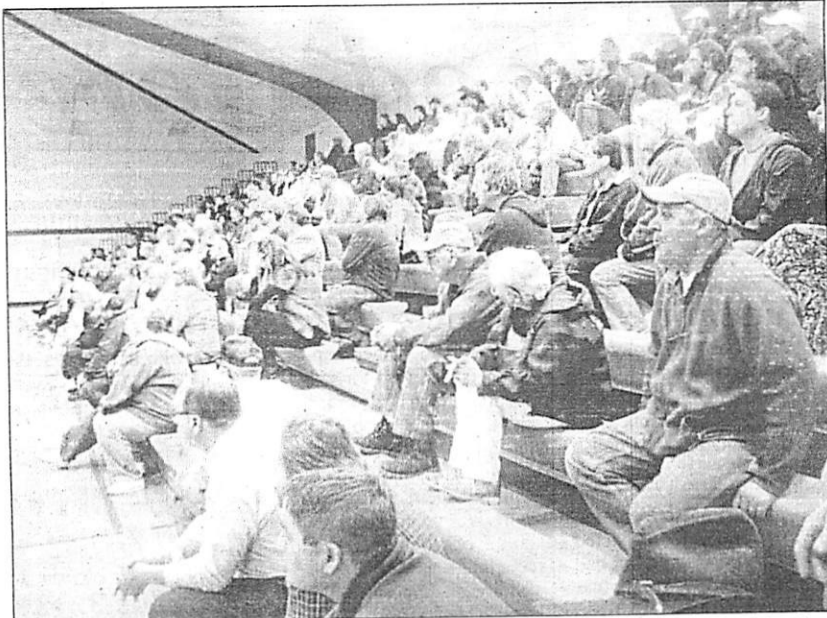
The former two-year contract remains in place until a new one is forged.

The contract offered by the commissioners was a three-year proposal that provided deputies a choice of options in handling overtime compensation. The deputies are being asked to choose whether, as a group, they want to receive overtime compensation in the form of paid comp time, or to be paid time-and-a-half for the overtime hours worked.

The proposal would have restricted deputies to banking only up to 40 hours of comp time before using it. After that, they would be paid time-and-a-half.

Commissioners said their goal throughout negotiations has been to simplify the payroll process, and to make it more compatible with the county's new time-keeping system.

Reno said that none of their proposals to streamline the process decrease earnings for the deputies. There is in fact a "net increase," he said.



LOCKWOOD – Over 250 Lockwood residents attended a community meeting last Thursday to discuss ideas about improvements to the community. It was probably the largest community meeting ever assembled and Montana Economic Development Agency officials said that it was the best response they had ever experienced in doing community assessments. (Courtesy photo)

McNiven impressed with ideas, response at follow-up meeting

by Evelyn Pyburn

LOCKWOOD – With more than 250 Lockwood citizens turning out for a meeting to review the results of a community assessment last Thursday, it was probably the largest gathering of Lockwood residents in history.

It was enough to please Rep. Jonathan McNiven, who had made it a goal to get 300 people to the meeting. "You have to have a goal," said McNiven, who was even more enthusiastic about what transpired at the meeting.

The assessment of Lockwood was done by a panel of experts assembled by the Montana Economic Development Association at the

behest of Big Sky Economic Development. The panel drew upon the knowledge and expertise of people involved with community development and economic growth in one way or another from throughout the state. They conducted two days of interviews and surveys of Lockwood residents, leaders and business people.

Prior to the meeting last week, the panel issued a report that made a wide range of recommendations and called the community to action.

The community seemed ready to do that. They were asked to "vote with their feet" regarding what they believed to be the most important issues confronting Lockwood.

They broke into sub-groups, lining up with individuals who were holding signs reflecting different areas of interest – education, business, image and media, transportation, water and sewer and governing.

Image and media seemed to be one of the most popular groups, drawing some 30 individuals. McNiven said that he was impressed with some of the ideas. The group set a date to meet again to pursue some of their ideas – for Nov. 14 at 7 p.m. in the commons of the Eileen Johnson Middle School.

Other groups also plan to meet again, with dates to be announced on the Lockwood webpage – www.lockwood-montana.com.

The "business" group is planning a breakfast meeting, said McNiven, who was impressed that prominent Lockwood business people attended the meeting. It is hard to get them to take time from their businesses, said McNiven, who personally called on some of them, urging them to attend.

McNiven predicted that people are going to start to see things happen in Lockwood over the next few months.

Another community-wide meeting will be held in six months to report on each group's progress. In a year, an anniversary celebration is being considered.

USDA to present funding to Lockwood sewer district Nov. 1

LOCKWOOD – The USDA Rural Development office will present more than \$6.2 million in loans and grants to the Lockwood Water and Sewer District to fund phase 2 of their wastewater project. The presentation is set for Friday, Nov. 1, at 2:30 p.m.

at the Lockwood Water office, 1644 Old Hardin Road.

District staff will give a project update at the event, as well.

The USDA funding package, when joined by the additional \$6.3 million from the state of Montana, and

a successful upcoming bond election on Nov. 5, will provide the necessary investment of \$12,597,000 for phase 2 construction.

"This funding represents a strong commitment and significant investment by the USDA and the state of Montana to the long-term success of Lockwood," the district stated.

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