

# County looking to buy former Colonial building

By ED HOWELL  
Eagle News Editor

The Walker County Commission is considering a \$230,000 purchase of the old Colonial Bank building in Jasper for several smaller county offices — although they found standing water or sewage in the basement Friday and would likely have to borrow the funds from Colonial Bank.



*Bruce Hamrick*

Commissioners — who have already been criticized this past election year for their borrowing methods — met first for a work session to hear an offer from Colonial Bank and then went down the street to look at the building themselves.

Chairman Bruce Hamrick shared a Dec. 7 letter from Larry J. Uptain, president of Colonial Bank in Walker County. Uptain noted he had visited the commission office to discuss the county's interest in the building, which served as the former down-

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Because the commission will close on Dec. 31, the county Revenue Department

changes to residential garbage schedules. Oakman Bank will close Friday and Dec. 27,

Farmers Bank and Pinnacle Bank will close at noon on Dec. 24, while Compass Bank

kitchen Christmas Day from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the church.

# Commission

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town Colonial branch before it moved to a new building across the street.

Uptain said he had ordered a survey, deed and sales contract, and mentioned an agreement to sell the building for \$230,000.

"As part of our agreement to sale at the price of \$230,000, I am requesting the agencies that will locate in the building to house checking accounts or various needs related to their agency be processed through Colonial. We look forward to assisting them with their financial needs," Uptain said.

Hamrick did not mention the request Friday, and said Colonial Bank's only mandate had been that the building not be used again for another bank.

"In addition to the above mentioned," Uptain said in the letter, "we agree to provide financing of the \$230,000 for a term of 15 years at a rate of 5.50 percent, resulting in a monthly payment of \$1,888.66. An annual payment at the rate of 5.55 percent would be \$21,981.67. All rates are tax free. A documentation fee of \$250 applies to both options."

Uptain, who was not available to meet with the commission Friday morning, said he looked forward to hearing from the commission after today's 9:30 a.m. scheduled commission meeting.

Hamrick told the commission Friday he, county engineer David Edgil and county Revenue Commissioner Jerry Guthrie had already looked at the building.

He said the Revenue Office also had valued the building at \$328,000, although Edgil said another appraisal was already underway.

"We need to give (Uptain) an answer," Hamrick said.

In August Hamrick had discussed about buying the building to turn over to the Reappraisal Office. However, Guthrie said then he was concerned about splitting his operation into two offices separated by several blocks and about how it

would affect his computer system. He said it would be difficult for real estate and title workers to go back and forth to two separate sites, as well as for Guthrie to oversee operations at both sites.

At the same time, Guthrie said at the time he is running out of room for records and people, and that the state will require annual reappraisals in the county by 2007, instead of every four years as is currently done. The last appraisal was in 2003. That will require hiring more people, probably another field appraiser and two clerks.

Guthrie said in August his office has 17 full-time employees, two part-time workers and four more seasonal workers for a total of 23. Some rooms are housing four or five employees each, and property auctions sometimes squeeze in 60 people.

Hamrick said Friday that with the Revenue Office growing and still needing more space, the solution would be to send the Treasurer's Office, the Veterans Affairs Office and the Board of Registrar's Office to the old Colonial Bank building. All currently share the same floor as Guthrie's office.

The District Attorney's Office also shares that floor, but no mention was made Friday of moving that office.

Hamrick said the Veteran's Affairs Office is willing to move, and that Guthrie has reported Treasurer Annette Burton would be willing to move. Hamrick said he feels the Board of Registrars would not mind the move, adding they are suffering from cramped office conditions.

However, any change would not be quick, as renovations would be needed.

"It will not be something we could renovate overnight," Hamrick said.

He also noted the building could be used for general storage, noting it has vault space leftover from its days as a bank.

Edgil said the old Colonial Bank building has 5,700 square feet upstairs and an

additional 1,380 square feet of space in the basement, for a total of 7,083 square feet.

Commissioners, some of whom had never been inside the building, decided to go that morning to the site. Outside commissioners felt the site, which has a city alley on the west end of the building and a city street on the east and north sides, would offer plenty of parking for the agencies mentioned.

Although some trash was still left in the building and one crack was found in the flooring, commissioners were pleased overall with the main floor, which can be accessed from the north and south entrances.

"It's not a bad location, not far from the courthouse," Commissioner Ben Huggins said. "With anticipated growth, you're going to need more space. That's a given."

However, commissioners were alarmed to find the basement flooded. Commissioner Randy Bridges, stepped down from the stairs into the flooding, only to find it was at least as deep as his ankle, if not deeper. Commissioners also wondered if the flooding was not water, but raw sewage.

"We'll need some more information on the basement," Huggins said. "There is a big problem down there."

Edgil said a pump is supposed to be working and that Uptain might not be aware of the flooding. An outside cord which might be connected with the pump was unplugged.

Hamrick said Uptain had wanted to sell the building by Dec. 31, but he felt the commission could get an extension to investigate the building further.

"We need to get the water issue resolved," he said.

As to the financing, Hamrick said if a loan for the full amount is not taken, the county would only have \$60,000 on hand to make a down payment for the building.