

# A cloud over city-county courthouse talks



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(Photo: Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

VERONA — The Augusta County Board of Supervisors wants to continue negotiating with the city of Staunton to find a solution for what to do about the county circuit courthouse in downtown Staunton.

The city has offered to pay \$12.5 million to help with the consolidation of the two localities' courthouses, a proposal the supervisors are not happy with.

After the offer was made in August, supervisors and City Council members, and staff members from both the city and county met twice to negotiate the proposal in closed session. Last week Pat Coffield, county administrator, sent a letter to Steve Owen, city manager, outlining the issues that the supervisors had with the proposal, namely the county felt they deserve more than 25 percent funding from the city.

Owen sent a response letter earlier this week rebutting Coffield's claims, concluding the letter by saying that it was clear the supervisors were not interested in negotiating a consolidation.

At Thursday's bimonthly supervisors' meeting, the board decided to continue to negotiate, despite their wavering confidence as to the effectiveness of that action.

Supervisors voiced disappointment with how negotiations have gone so far, and the city's attitude toward the county and their lack of interest in working with the supervisors.

Tracy Pyles said of working with city staff and council members, "To me we changed from working in a collegial way, to being adversaries."

Other supervisors said the decision about what to do about the courthouse should be up to the next board — all seven seats are up for re-election on Nov. 3.

"We need to sit back and see what Staunton does," said Supervisor Carolyn Bragg.

The \$12.5 million offered by Staunton is a non-starter, said Supervisor Larry Wills. They will have to increase their contribution if the supervisors are going to get on board.

Jeff Moore said he agrees with sticking with the Dec. 1 deadline for continuing negotiations with Staunton, but feels in the end moving forward with a new courthouse complex in Verona is the best decision for the future of Augusta County.

Chairman Michael Shull thinks that Staunton wants to "revitalize" downtown at the expense of county taxpayers and that's not going to happen.

The December deadline is fast approaching, Shull said, and Staunton needs to make a move.

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