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# Coal miner museum gets approval from county

**Chris Silcox**  
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Approximately 100 people packed into the Anderson County Courthouse's Commission Room Monday night as a show of support for a proposed coalminers museum in downtown Lake City.

It was that display of commitment from the Lake City community that acting Commission Chairperson Robin Biloski (Dist. 8) cited as the reason she changed her vote approving the county's purchase of the former Bank of America Building to house the museum.

Biloski's vote, it turned out, wasn't even needed. The motion to purchase

the building passed with a resounding count of 13-1.

A round of applause from the room full of supporters echoed through the halls of the courthouse when the final tally was read.

The county is now set to purchase the two-story brick building for \$100,000 and then donate it back to the city in hopes of revitalizing the town's stagnant downtown area, thus creating a new revenue stream in tourism dollars from the museum.

According to town officials the museum could be open for business as soon as March of 2014.



Dozens of Lake City residents crammed into the Anderson County Courthouse's Commission Room on Monday, Aug. 25, in support of the proposed Lake City Coalminers Museum. — Chris Silcox

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# Museum

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The idea of a coalminers museum in the historic former mining community has been a topic of interest among county government leaders for more than two decades but until now it has never generated enough local momentum to move past the planning stages.

Several commissioners stated Monday night that their faith in the project was renewed with the show of support they witnessed from the people of Lake City since last week's Operations Committee meeting.

Biloski and Dist. 6 Commissioner Whitey Hitchcock voted against the motion to purchase the building last week, but the outpouring of support resonating from the Lake City community over the last seven days convinced both Oak Ridge officials to reconsider their position on the matter entering Monday's meeting.

Dist. 5 Commissioner Dusty Irwin was the only commissioner to vote against the plan.

Hitchcock stated it was the level of commitment that he'd seen from the community that convinced him to get on board with the project.

"I've always been supportive of the coalminers museum and I will vote affirmative today," said Hitchcock. "I suggested (last week) that there should be a cost-sharing involved but I heard from a lot of leaders in Lake City who took the time to write me specifically and that made a big difference...I think they've got what it takes in terms of effective people leading this, so I believe that it will come to fruition and it won't be an empty building."

Lake City Mayor Tim Sharp explained that town officials worked with Anderson County Tourism Director Stephanie Wells over the last week to put together a detailed business plan, installing a nine-member board of directors to immediately begin oversight of museum operations.

Sharp says he's been inundated with positive feedback from community members excited about the potential impact the museum could have on the town.

"I am amazed at the level of support we're seeing from the community for this museum," said Sharp. "I think we all recognize what a great effect this would have on the revitalization of our downtown."

Wells noted that the city would apply for available grants to assist with funding for various aspects of the project, including the renovation of the old bank building. She added that a group has been collecting historical artifacts for the museum since around the time of the 1982 World's Fair.

Lake City town council did its part by earmarking one-third of its annual income from hotel/motel tax for the next three years to pay the museum's initial operating costs.

County Mayor Terry Frank, however, is still not sold on the idea. She reiterated her position that Lake City should seek funding for the project from the Tourism Council rather than the county.

Frank stated that it's not fair for this project to be financed with county funds while other projects have been waiting longer to receive such funding.

"The greater issue is the sheer number of folks who come to us for funding," said the Mayor. "And we have put



Coal Creek Watershed Foundation President Barry Thacker addressed the Anderson County Commission on Monday, Aug. 19, to endorse the county's purchase of the former Bank of America Building in downtown Lake City. County Commission voted 13-1 to purchase the building and to donate it back to Lake City for the purpose of opening a coalminers museum. — Chris Silcox

numerous individuals on a capital outlay waiting list...I just ask you to be sensitive to that."

Frank added: "I know we have a room full of supporters, and I'm not asking to kill the project, but I think a different funding source is in order to explain that to the individuals who want money for their project."

"Basically, what we have done is we have allowed someone to cut line, if you will," the Mayor continued. "That's not a popular thing to say but maybe that's the mom in me. The mom in me wants to make sure that all three of my children know that they are loved equally."

Barry Thacker, the President of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, reminded the Mayor that Lake City is actually overdue for some county support.

"I'd like to address something that Mayor Frank said in regards to waiting your turn. Over the past 13 years the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation has invested over \$300,000 in that area...and we've never asked for a dime from the county. Now we're asking," stated Thacker, whose foundation is aimed at improving the quality of life in the Coal Creek Watershed.

Dist. 4 Commissioner Tim Isbel has been the plan's most vocal advocate in county government. Isbel also addressed the Mayor's concerns, explaining that this project is unique because it's a one-shot deal with a constantly narrowing window of time. Since the bank building is being offered at below-market price, the county must move now to buy the building or it will lose the opportunity to purchase it at this price, said Isbel.

"This aspect of the project is very time-sensitive," Isbel commented.

Dist. 5 Commissioner Robert McKamey, who made the original motion to purchase the building at last week's Operations Committee meeting, said it's fitting that the money for the purchase come from the county's industrial funds because the coalminers museum will actually serve as Lake City's industry going for-

ward.

Thacker agrees that tourism revenue sparked by the museum could be pivotal to the future of the town. Thacker has made it his personal mission to promote and preserve the historical relevance of the Lake City/Briceville area. He noted this week that the museum could help the region's historical significance translate into an economic windfall for both Lake City and Anderson County.

The only disappointing aspect of the project, said Thacker, is that a couple of the local trailblazers of the plan are not around to see it become a reality.

"The museum is another validation of the 'Gone, but not forgotten' inscription on so many of the miners' headstones," Thacker commented. "For me, it helps fulfill promises I made to past Coal Creek leaders the Rev. Roy Daughtery and Mayor Buck Wilson before they passed away, while also providing an opportunity for the entire community to demonstrate that mining tourists can be as profitable as mining coal."

Wells, who has served as the unofficial voice of the project over the last couple weeks, drew an extended standing ovation from audience members as well as members of the Commission by closing her presentation Monday night explaining how the dying words of a minor trapped in the 1902 Fraterville Mine Disaster has served as an inspiration in the rally to keep this project alive.

Almost breathless following her 10 minute presentation, Wells stated: "It says, 'Oh God for one more breath, remember me as long as you live.' Those words were written by Jacob Vowell as he was trapped in one of the mines after the disaster. He wrote that to his wife. Those are the words that we plan to use as our motto, as our mission statement, and basically our inspiration for the museum."

According to Lake City officials, the contract on the building is scheduled to be signed Wednesday and the deal should be closed within 30 days.

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# OPINION

## A portal to an important chapter of our history

On Monday night the Anderson County Commission allocated \$100,000 to purchase a building in downtown Lake City for the establishment of Coal Miners Museum that would be located in the Bank of America building on Main Street. Most families in Lake City, Briceville, Fraterville, and New River areas have parents or grandparents over the past 150 years who were miners at some point in their lives. Mining is as central to our culture as science and energy is to Oak Ridge families. Coal played a big part in fueling American industry and providing energy for families across the south as Anderson County was a focal point of the coal mining industry.

From the Coal Creek Wars to the Fraterville Mining disasters early in the 20th century our coal mining history is a story that must be told. The sacrifices of hundreds of lives of school age boys and men to the thousands of lives cut short by black lung and other diseases from years underground is a part of American history. In many ways Coal Creek, (modern day Lake City) is a Secret City that has a story that needs to be shared with our nation. A group of dedicated professionals and volunteers are ready to transform a former bank building into a state of the art museum that will attract thousands of visitors from across America and provide a glimpse into the story of the people that mined coal in the mountains of Anderson and surrounding counties since the 1800's. They will learn about the worst mining disaster in Tennessee history where 216 miners perished ranging in age from age 12 to 61. They will learn of the Fraterville Miners Circle Cemetery where 89 of the 216 are buried just a short drive from the museum listed on the National Register of His-

### Guest Column

**Tim Isbel**  
County Commissioner



toric Places. They will see pictures of the miners and their surviving families and caskets in photo exhibits and they will learn of a thriving community that had an opera house, a newly built church in 1888 and they will read the last notes and dying requests from many of the 26 who did not perish immediately but barricaded themselves inside and wrote letters to their loved ones.

Visitors to the Museum will discover the town of Coal Creek that was a booming community and the largest town in Anderson County at the turn of the 20th century. They will watch videos and read stories about miners who defended their jobs and battled prison labor provided by the state to mine owners resulting in the Coal Creek Wars.

Anderson County students and other school children across East Tennessee will make field trips to Lake City to visit the Museum and learn about American history made right here in Anderson County.

Everyone will be educated on how much sacrifice was involved in being a miner, and the tools they used to mine our mountains. They will learn what contributions coal made to America.

Anderson County Commission has taken a step that will be enhanced by our outstanding Tourism Office Program and other volunteers that will make us all proud. We will work together and will let Americans know that we met the challenge and made our country stronger and carved our niche in American history.