

Not enough Braille School facts to act

**By Faith Ann Brown
Correspondent**

VINTON – While valid questions were raised regarding a proposal of the sale of the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School (IBSSS) buildings and grounds to the regular Vinton council meeting few answers were available.

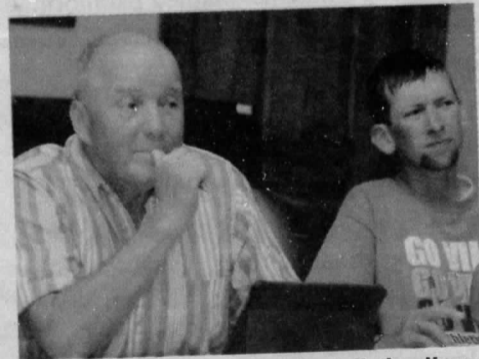
“We just don’t have enough information to be able to tell you what we are going to be do-

ing,” John Watson, Vinton mayor, shared with the approximately two dozen people in attendance at the meeting.

“Council members and myself received this large packet of information at a meeting last week with representatives from the Iowa Board of Regents,” Watson stated. Some of the information

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Mayor John Watson and Councilman Nathan Hesson listen to comments.



Don Eells asks a question while Benton County Supervisors Terry Hertle and others listen. Photos by Jim Morrison

Facts: It's going to be a long process, a big project to undertake

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included in the 50 plus page packet gave details about the history of the school, the property, changes to the property over the past decades and some information about the number of employees at the school.

"How was the proposal of this property transfer submitted to the city?" Dave Redlinger, Vinton, asked.

Watson and Chris Ward, city administrator, shared that a phone call received in June asked if the city would be interested in purchasing the property.

"We told them at the time that we didn't know for sure, we simply needed more information," Watson said.

After that initial conversation, Ward explained that had been a telephone conversation where more questions and concerns were raised, how the sale may proceed and if the legislature had been informed of this proposal.

At the meeting last week, city officials had invited State Rep. Dawn Pettengill and State Sen. Tim Kapucian to attend. "We invited these individuals so they could be a part of the discussion and find out what was going on," Watson told those in attendance.

He explained that at the end of last week's meeting, it was the city's understanding that there was some additional information that was going to be collected before another meeting could be scheduled. "Then we found out that the

Regents informed staff members at the school on Thursday of the possible sale.

"We understand that the people at the site are anxious about what is going on, but at this time we (the city) need more information before any plans can be made. It's not that we aren't interested, but we still have so many questions that need to be answered," Watson added.

The question was raised, if the Board of Regents could actually sell the property without the approval of the state legislature.

Rep. Pettengill explained that former Rep. Kyle Hummel introduced legislature back in the 1980s that was approved that put in place a process before a sale could be completed.

"The Department of Management would need to complete a report and present to the legislature outlining the closing of the school.

"At that point, there would be a two year timeframe put in place before the actual implementation of closure," Pettengill said. During the recent discussions, Pettengill added that staff members were stating that the 'students' were the school and not the actual buildings, however, the approved legislation specifically lists the sites in Vinton and the School of the Deaf in Council Bluffs.

Other questions raised during the meeting, which city officials indicated there were no firm answers for, included:

-What about the Mary Ingalls Society and the work that the group has done?

"The Regents are aware of the Society and they asked that if the city purchased the property, that we allow the work that group does to continue," Ward told those in attendance.

-Could a task force be formed to look at the proposal?

"That is a great idea," Watson said. "But my concern is that at this point it may be premature, I just not sure that we have enough information yet to be able to take a knowledgeable look at the proposal."

He added that since the beginning of these discussions he has had three thoughts that remain "First, I don't believe the city can undertake this project without a partner, secondly I would like to see the state put aside some funds for the maintenance of the grounds and thirdly I'd like to see a citizens committee that would oversee what is going on, what leases would be put in place and give approval for changes/updates that may need to occur."

He added that he would like to have a meeting with city officials, Board of Regents, AmeriCorps and local state legislators. "I think we need to have this meeting so we can all sit down and see what agreements can be made with all those involved."

Pettengill shared that reviewing the

minutes from the Board of Regents' meetings, "this matter was never discussed in an open meeting. We need to make sure that this matter is transparent and respectful of all citizens impacted in the decisions made," she stated.

"I just want to make sure that everyone understands that this is a big project," Redlinger said, with city officials taking their time before making any decisions.

Julie Pieper, Vinton and IBSSS alumni, reminded those at the meeting that during the 1980s there was some discussion of turning the facility in Vinton into a minimum security prison. "As citizens, we should be concerned about who may be 'next' in line" if Vinton city officials should decide to pass on the offer.

"How do you plan to keep citizens informed of what is going on," Drew Sallee, Vinton, asked Watson and council members, toward the end of the discussion.

Watson and Robert Fischer, city attorney, confirmed that any future discussions would be held in an open meeting forum. "We'll be sure to let our citizens know using the local newspapers and other forums like that," Watson stated.

"I wish we had good solid answers for the questions that you have," he said. "I want to thank you all for coming to the meeting and sharing your concerns and questions."