

## ARE COUNTY BUILDINGS SAFE ENOUGH?

Jeanette Browning  
Assistant Editor

The aftermath of an employee suicide at the Platte County courthouse has left County officials dealing with both questions on workplace and courthouse security as well as recovering from a tragedy at the county seat.

At approximately 4:30 p.m. Aug. 28, two facility maintenance employees entered the men's restroom attached to the Division 1 jury deliberation room and discovered the body of court reporter Terry Easton. Easton, 50, of Parkville, died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He was a familiar face at the courthouse, as he had worked there as a state employee for the Missouri Circuit Court for 20 years. Easton's obituary appears on Page A6.

Captain Frank Hunter of the Platte County Sheriff's Department said the death had been ruled a suicide after an investigation by deputies, and the Jackson County Medical Examiner was called to the scene immediately after the discovery of the body. Easton used a gun purchased earlier that day from a local gun shop, and brought it as well as a box of ammunition inside the courthouse.

County employees are not required to pass through metal detectors before entering the courthouse and are granted access by key-card identification. As a state employee and the court reporter of Platte County Circuit Court Judge Abe Shafer, Easton had an additional security clearance to enter the judge's chambers. Hunter said last week no changes to security were on the horizon.

"There is no plan to change anything as far as screening employees entering the Courthouse," he said.

"Trying to man metal detectors at all entrances is not practical and we're not sure it could have prevented this unfortunate incident. We're looking at it as an aberration and out of the norm."

Hunter added that while there is a metal detector at the Courthouse front door entrance, there is not a detector at the Administration Building entrance.

Presiding Commissioner Betty Knight said a review was in order.

"When something tragic like this happens, you always have to take stock of what you are doing and see if there is something better that can be done," Knight said. "The 'what-ifs' in a situation like this will always be there, and I don't know that this could have been prevented."

She said a meeting would soon be held with the judiciary to see if they and their staff felt safe, or if they felt additional security was warranted. After meeting with Shafer, Judge Lee Hull and the Sheriff's Department, a decision would be made whether employee security screening was needed.

"I think we're all still just busy dealing with everything," said Director of Administration Dana Babcock.

"With people out of town and the holiday weekend, we're still recovering."

She did point out that reports in other media outlets that there had been high-level meetings on courthouse security were untrue.

Neighboring Clay County currently has the same security system for its employees, as well as state employees working in the county government complex in Liberty. Director of Community Relations Leslie Ensign said the Clay County Sheriff's Department had plans to review its security policy, however.

"It's not just that this happened in Platte County — if this happened anywhere it would spur a review," she said. "It will involve a lot of different departments if a change is considered, so the Sheriff's Department would work with those departments to determine if a policy change is indicated."

Of the first-class counties in the Kansas City metropolitan area, Knight said to her knowledge Johnson County, Kan. was the only one to require employees to go through security checkpoints when entering county buildings.

### Recovery

Platte County Human Relations Coordinator LeAnna Fannon said the county's primary HR concern was seeing to the needs of the two employees who found Easton's body and those who worked closely with him every day. Since some of these employees work for the county and some for the state, coordinating mental health benefits was one of the county's first challenges.

Tri-County Mental Health Services counselors visited the courthouse last week to hold both one-on-one and group sessions to help employees cope with the tragedy. The facility maintenance employees, as well as the judicial employees, were told to take paid leaves if they desired.

“Everybody is being extremely supportive right now,” Babcock said. “If people need help with something outside of their department, they just do it.”

Fannon said future considerations would be made for the facilities employees if they didn’t want to re-enter the restroom. The focus right now is on recovery, and getting people help if they need it. Tri-County has briefed the human resources department on the stages of grief and recovery, and continuing assistance will be available for employees.

During the regular County Commission session Aug. 30, 1st District Commissioner Tom Pryor commented on the tragedy.

“I certainly offer my prayers to the gentleman’s family, and to the two employees who found him and those who worked with him,” he said.

Second District Commissioner Jim Plunkett added his prayers to the public comment as well.

Citizen staff reporters Lee Stubbs and Jerry Keuhn contributed to this report.

## **Rally’s future up in air**

Jeanette Browning  
Assistant Editor

After another round of contentious discussion by the Platte City Board of Aldermen, the future of Platte City’s End-of-the-Trail Rally is still in question.

While the \$15,000 originally earmarked for next year’s rally will remain in Platte City’s 2008 budget, the distinction marking it as specifically for a rally has been struck from the item description. Aldermen in favor of the motion say this leaves the option for the City to continue the rally, or to develop a new festival to replace it. The motion, introduced by Alderman Andy Stanton, passed with only Marsha Clark opposed. At the Aug. 21 meeting, Stanton moved the \$15,000 in city funding be stricken from the 2008 budget.

Mayor Dave Brooks cast the tie-breaking vote to keep the rally in the preliminary budget that evening. The board began its continued discussion on the subject when Board President Aaron Jung cited an article in the St. Joseph News-Press on a similar motorcycle rally to be held at the same time as the End-of-the-Trail Rally.

“Isn’t this in direct competition?” He asked, suggesting the board yank the funding for next year’s festival and develop a festival that would not be in direct competition — suggesting a ‘pioneer days,’ or ‘Platte City days’ type of event.

Brooks came back on the defensive, stating he had been fielding calls from people questioning why the rally was under fire.

“We’re sending a message that we don’t want people who ride motorcycles in town,” he said.

Jung said that was not his interpretation of the situation, and his criticism of the rally was not a personal attack on Brooks.

“No one can belittle the work you’ve put into this rally — you’ve definitely put your heart and soul in it,” he said.

Brooks said if Jung wanted another festival in the city, he was welcome to form a committee and try to establish one.

“If the small amount of money we spend on the rally brings a large amount of people to town, what’s wrong with that?” Brooks said. “You’re acting like this is a budget problem, but it’s not a budget problem.” Stanton suggested taking the word “rally” off the budget line item description, and leaving it open for a festival to be determined at a future date. With the annual citizen satisfaction survey coming this winter, he suggested the City ask citizens what sort of festival they wanted to see in the City.

“I don’t particularly love the hog rally,” Clark said. “But it’s all we have. I think it should stay and we should have three or four more festivals, too.”

Jung said the city could not afford more festivals, leading Brooks to ask Jung if as liaison to the Platte City Area Chamber of Commerce if he or the chamber had ideas for other festivals. Jung said there had been discussion but that it was not the chamber’s function to come up with festivals.

“I’ve been on Main Street for 30 years,” Clark said. “I remember Zed Martin Days, and everybody had the opportunity to help with that, but it died because there was no help. We don’t need to be beating this festival up.”

“That’s why we leave the money in place and see if the citizens want this festival,” Stanton said. “Okay, what if people say they want a clown festival?” Clark said. “Do we do that then?” Stanton said, yes, because then that would be the will of the people. Alderman Ron Stone interjected to say it was not the rally being beaten up by the discussion, it was bikers themselves. “We’re sending the wrong message here,” he said. “We’re sending the message to people that we don’t like bikers.” Brooks said Platte City had been receiving bad press because of the board’s vote Aug. 21, and stated the average biker was 47 years old and made \$78,000 per year. “These are the kind of people you want,” he said. “It’s not like we’re attracting dirt to the city.” Jung said perhaps such comments by Brooks were in fact causing the perception the board was against bikers. Alderman Todd Sloan said the true issue was that bikers were a very specific target group, and that a festival paid for by taxpayer dollars should cater to more broad interests. Tension continued after the subject had come to a vote, when Sloan suggested the city retain money in the budget for the future purchase of a decibel meter to enforce a possible noise ordinance. “Maybe we should buy it today,” Stanton said, stating if the City police wrote a \$50 ticket each time a loud motorcycle was started this weekend, the meter would be paid for in no time. “See, that’s where people get the idea we’re against bikers,” Clark said.

## **Parkville aldermen view presentations**

JERRY KEUHN  
Reporter

The Parkville Board of Aldermen were the recipients of two presentations concerning progress before and during its board meeting Sept. 4 — one of which dealt with a proposed pipeline to run through English Landing Park, and another from a citizen group worried about too much progress from an area development.

Prior to the regular meeting, the board held a work session in which it discussed the pipeline proposed by Missouri American Water, which has recommended a pipeline running approximately 5,000 feet through English Landing Park. The water company said the pipeline would provide for needs of additional water presented by future population and business growth, and said it should help stabilize water pressure in Parkville.

Parkville Mayor Kathy Dusenbery said she had concerns about the pipeline as proposed and said the plan still needed work.

“This park is our crown jewel and we have to be able to come up with something much more feasible than what we have seen tonight,” she said. “We’ll have to do some public relations for when this ground is tore up.”

Missouri American Water engineering manager Stacy Hoffman said that recent improvements made to the water system should already be increasing water pressure in Parkville, and that work has also been done to soften the water supply with lime to help solve problems with corrosion.

Dusenbery suggested a meeting between the water company, city administrator Joe Turner, the public works department and the City to see what options were available.

During the regular board meeting, the board listened to a presentation from Mike Porter and a couple other concerned citizens about the proposed Brentwood Parc development and the possibility of increased traffic in Parkville as a result. Porter advised the board of an upcoming public hearing to be held Oct. 9 at the Platte County Courthouse in Platte City, and asked the board to oppose the development even though it is not within Parkville city limits.

“You may ask how is Parkville affected by this?” he said. “I know it (the development) won’t be in Parkville, but we still drive the same roads.”

Community development director Sean Ackerson said the reason the City is involved is because the development is within a certain distance of City limits. He also mentioned a couple of letters concerning traffic impact studies which he said had been reviewed by City staff which said the development would not

have a significant impact on traffic. The board also heard from the developer, who said he believed the additional traffic caused by the development would be adequately dispersed in all directions. Dusenbery asked that since the request for a resolution opposing the development had just been received by the board, that no action be taken at the present time.