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County board examines smoking issue

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— By JEREMY HALL

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MT. VERNON — The County Board learned Monday it has two options in terms of smoking guidelines at the courthouse: Choose a legal smoking area or ban smoking from the entire grounds.

Both Jefferson County Sheriff Roger Mulch and State's Attorney Gary Duncan told the board the Smoke Free Illinois Act which went into effect Jan. 1 rendered illegal a previous county allowance of smoking in the sally port of the courthouse.

According to the act, smoking is prohibited within 15 feet of all public entrances as well as within public buildings statewide.

Mulch said he has been in contact with someone who can provide a portable smoking area for the county should the board choose to install one.

"I would propose we just ban smoking from the entire courthouse grounds," said County Board member Dexter Edmison.

"My concern," added board chairman Ted Buck, "is a nonsmoker walking through the smoke and suing the county."

The board authorized Buck to continue to look into the matter for a possible solution.

The board began looking at the issue after a letter was received from the Jefferson County Health Department advising a complaint had been filed of a violation of the smoke-free act at the courthouse.

Also on Monday, the board heard that a sharp rise in health insurance costs was due to the amount in claims paid on behalf of county employees in the past.

"They paid out \$750,000 last year," Buck said. "We paid \$600,000. There's not a lot of insurance companies that want a piece of that."

Buck noted that as of Aug. 1, the cost to the county for employee insurance will rise 31 percent and will mean an average increase of 4.1 percent in pay toward each employee.

After discussing options that included three levels of deductibles, the board opted to wait a month before choosing a health plan. In doing so, the county will pay the higher fee for the current coverage plan during the month of August.

In addition to discussing the health insurance options regarding county employees, the board voted to make elected officials pay 50 percent of their health insurance premiums.

All newly elected or appointed and re-elected or re-appointed officials will be required to pay half their premiums.

Board member Wayne Hails cast the lone "no" vote on the issue.

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