

## **New County Coroners Office to be completed soon**

By: Royce Armstrong

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The George County Board of Supervisors approved a resolution approving using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, also known as Covid relief funds, to build a new county morgue during its regular meeting last week. Construction of the 30'x40' brick-sided structure began last week as well and is scheduled to be completed by January 31, 2023, according to county communications director Ken Flanagan.

The building will include space for the county coroner's office and a new walk-in cooler. The building is being erected on a tract of land just off Summer St. that was donated by County Board president Frankie Massey.

Coroner DeeAnn Murrah has been asking supervisors for an improved morgue facility since she was first elected in 2015. "I wouldn't want one of my family members to go there, and I wouldn't want to go there," Murrah said in an earlier interview.

The current morgue is in a small building behind the George County Funeral Home. It is more than 30 years old, according to Murrah, who adds that it is small, dimly lit, and is in disrepair. Supervisors have discussed options for a county morgue facility for a decade or more.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed a critical need for a new and larger county morgue, according to Flanagan. During the peak of the pandemic the county suffered several deaths during one two-week period plus an auto accident with two fatalities from out-of-state. District One supervisor Frankie Massey was new to the Board and had taken on the morgue project. He recalls the old cooler kept breaking down and he spent a lot of time in July trying to keep it operating.

The four local funeral homes stepped in to help out. "It would have been a very difficult situation without them," Massey recalls.

A morgue is a facility used by the county coroner where human remains can be held or stored until claimed by family members or if homeless or indigent, buried by the county. In larger communities the morgue also contains equipment allowing the coroner or medical examiner to perform autopsies and other procedures to determine cause of death. Such procedures are necessary when criminal or civil litigation is likely. George County autopsies and many examinations are performed by the State Medical Examiner, so some of the equipment of a larger morgue is not being included at this time.

This is a project the Board has discussed and needed to do for a number of years," Frankie Massey said. "The need was greater because of Covid, and the funds became available. The facility is pretty basic. It will have an office and reception area with a new, larger cooler. There is also room for an additional office if one is needed in the future. We should be set for years to come."

Massey noted the project is moving along quickly, in part due to cooperation from the City of Lucedale and an easement given by the First Baptist Church.