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Contracts awarded for Berks County Agricultural Center renovations

The county commissioners awarded four contracts that will mark the beginning of the renovation project.



BEN HASTY – READING EAGLE

The Berks County Agricultural Center in Bern Township

By **KAREN SHUEY** | kshuey@readingeagle.com | Reading Eagle
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Changes are coming to the Berks County Agricultural Center.

The county commissioners have awarded four contracts totaling a combined \$8.1 million to complete the first phase of extensive renovations to provide more breathing room for the organizations that call the nearly 50-year-old facility home.

The Bern Township center houses several county and federal agencies. The Berks County Conservation District and two U.S. Department of Agriculture programs — the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service — have been calling on the county to address the tight squeeze.

The commissioners approved the renovation plan last summer [following a presentation by Scott Graham of Muhlenberg Greene Architects](#) outlining the renovations needed to bring the facility into compliance with the needs of the three organizations.

The biggest change to the building includes expanding the footprint of the two federal agencies on the second floor and converting the warehouse into office space for the conservation district.

Graham said the county forensic services unit would remain in the basement and the Berks County Penn State Extension would stay on the first floor. The Berks County Department of Agriculture could have its own office space in the warehouse or occupy space on the second floor — both options would increase its current workspace.

In addition to the renovations to reconfigure the building, Graham said a number of other improvements would be made like making the restrooms ADA compliant, installing more energy-efficient windows and giving the exterior a face-lift.

The renovations are expected to cost about \$10 million to complete.

The following contracts were awarded Thursday:

- General construction to Balton Construction Inc. of Lebanon County at a bid not to exceed \$4.4 million.
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- Electrical construction to I.B. Abel Inc. of York at a bid not to exceed \$915,000.
- Plumbing construction to Vision Mechanical Inc. of West Reading at a bid not to exceed \$241,000.

Also at the meeting, Commissioner Lucine Sihelnik announced the board is discussing declaring Juneteenth an official county holiday. The designation would align with the recent federal and state recognition of the holiday.

Juneteenth commemorates the freedom of slaves in the former Confederate states following the conclusion of the Civil War.

In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the slaves in the Confederate states freed. But word of the proclamation was slow to reach people around the country.

On June 19, 1865, later called Juneteenth, an estimated 250,000 slaves in Texas finally received official notification of their freedom.

Sihelnik said the commissioners have directed county solicitor Christine Sadler and the human resources department to take the necessary steps to work toward implementing the holiday into the county calendar beginning in 2024.

Once those steps are complete, the commissioners will take formal action on the matter.



Karen Shuey | Government and policy reporter

Karen Shuey joined the Reading Eagle staff in 2015. She covers county government as well as policy issues at the state and federal level with a local focus. Before arriving at the Reading Eagle, Karen covered policy issues in Harrisburg and Washington for LNP. She is a graduate of Temple University with a degree in journalism.

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