

County supervisors consider options for historic courthouse



The historic Yolo County Courthouse is nearing the end of its intended purpose. Now, county officials are grappling with how to best use the stately, old building. Sue Cockrell/Enterprise file photo

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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WOODLAND — If walls could talk, Yolo County’s historic courthouse in Woodland would likely have much to say, for much has happened inside those walls over the last 98 years.

Built in 1917 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987, the 50,000-square-foot building on Court Street has been the scene of many a courtroom drama over the course of nearly a century.

But that drama will come to an end later this summer when all courthouse operations are packed up and moved a block over to Main Street, to take up residence in a newly built, modern building.

Left behind will be an historic building in fairly good shape, well-maintained but in need of upgrades to plumbing, fire sprinklers and alarm systems, as well as a need to satisfy compliance issues related to accessibility.

And it will fall to the Board of Supervisors to decide what use to make of the four-story building and its marble walls and floors and rotundas.

While many ideas were collected when the county solicited input from the community two years ago and much is yet to be decided, one thing was clear when the board discussed the issue on Tuesday: The county wants to minimize the amount of time the building is left vacant and thus vulnerable to a whole host of problems.

“We need to determine if there is some function we can put in there right away,” said Deputy County Administrator Mindi Nunes, who noted that the old county hospital at Cottonwood and Beamer has been empty for a while and the result has been vandalism, graffiti and other ills related to vacant buildings.

“We’d rather not leave the courthouse vacant for any period of time,” she said.

Most likely to make the move first appears to be the Yolo County Archives, which has outgrown its space on Buckeye Street.

County archives coordinator Meredith Sarmiento told supervisors the archive collection is currently at risk due to overcrowding and environmental factors.

“Currently we house almost 6,500 linear feet of records and they’re stored in almost 3,000 feet of storage so they are double-stacked, two deep and two high,” she said.

A preservation assessment done several years ago, Sarmiento added, cited that overcrowding as one of the greatest risks to the collection.

Meanwhile, the archives staff has been in an almost constant battle with the elements, struggling to keep temperatures in the 60s and humidity at a minimum.

“So we do need to move out,” Sarmiento said, “and the courthouse would give us the space we need.”

Yolo County Librarian and Archivist Patty Wong agreed that the courthouse “offers an ideal situation for relocation of county archives.”

“Its central location ... its iconic stature,” Wong said, would be “a prominent draw for community members, historians and the public to conduct research and discover the richness of the collection.”

“We hope the new location would allow for growth of the collection, a good size reading room and dedicated space for one-on-one and group educational opportunities, including physical and digital tours and displays of the key treasures in our collection,” Wong said.

“I think it makes all the sense in the world,” said Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis. “When you’re in the building, you see the beauty of it... The uses that would be most appealing to me would be uses that bring (people in).”

Least appealing, he said, would be government offices.

Government offices were indeed among the ideas put forward during the community survey two years ago. Others included the museum/archives space; educational programs like a technical school, UC Davis extension or after-school programs; public meeting space as well as event space and mock trial space; a place for non-profits, business start-ups, churches or the chamber of commerce; and retail space.

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis said he is interested in uses that take advantage of the fact that the building is an historic courthouse. He suggested a courtroom that could be available for domestic violence victims to practice what it will be like in an actual courtroom, or for reenactment of past trials for students or even a place where a visiting Court of Appeals could hold session.

“It’s a big building and there is a tremendous amount of opportunity going forward,” Provenza said.

County staff, meanwhile, is recommending that the archives be the first to move into the courthouse, as soon as court operations move out and initial remodeling can take place.

“(T)his central location for archives is ideal,” the staff report said. “Planning for the relocation (of the archives) to the first floor of the courthouse will allow the county to avoid leaving the courthouse vacant while options for the second and third floors are explored.”

A report commissioned by the county estimates the cost of remodeling the courthouse for alternate use at as much as \$12.4 million.

“Assuming a floor-by-floor remodel with some entire facility upgrades (i.e. plumbing) required in the initial remodel, a very rough estimate of moving archives would be in the \$5 million range,” staff reported. “This estimate would be included in the three-year capital improvement program financing scheduled to be brought to the board in September.”

Nunes noted that the plan would require that “the majority of costs ... will be borne at the front.”

But all five supervisors voiced support for moving the archives over, with Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento noting that “using this beautiful building as a museum and archive (is) a perfect way to keep it alive.”

County staff will return to the board at a later date with a proposal and associated costs for supervisors’ approval. Current court operations, meanwhile, are expected to move to the new courthouse in late July or early August, Nunes said.

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