

Courthouse issue getting spacey

One sunny afternoon in 1973, I opened the door to find a sheriff's deputy standing on my porch in full uniform, gun and all. With my frightened children clutching at my skirt, he stepped into my entryway and read a document saying that I and the entire Knox County board were being sued for lack of action on the subject of — you'll never guess — space allocation at the courthouse. Judge Daniel Roberts had become so frustrated and angry he just sued the whole outfit.

After a hiatus of 16 years, I was elected to the board again in 1992 and assigned to the Courthouse and Insurance committee. The burning issue of the day? Space allocation in the courthouse. In the mid-90s some major remodeling was done, which brought traffic court to the first floor and moved the County Clerk's office. The Recorder's office was relegated to the third floor. The circuit clerk traffic division was brought to the first floor next to the new traffic court, where they now have far less space than they did. I'm ashamed to say I was a county board member when this part of the plan was approved.

Suffice it to say that the questions of overcrowding and unhealthy air in the basement are not new, but somehow just cannot be solved by the county board. They ought to take lessons from Township supervisor Chris Winick, who, along with her board, which is the Galesburg City Council, made plans for a new building, saved the money, hired a contractor and built it. All of this was done in about a tenth of the time it took the board to figure out where to put the new jail, let alone build it.

A space allocation study was presented to the board in 1991, compiled by the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts in Springfield. Someone must have been getting concerned. In 1993 and 1995 I made suggestions to the courthouse committee regarding solving the space problems in the courthouse, but to no avail.

Three county departments are already housed in other buildings and we are paying rent, which is expensive. The County Assessor, Zoning department and county executive are in the Liebovitz building. The Regional Superintendent of Schools is in old city hall.

An additional building should contain the non-judicial offices: the County Clerk, Treasurer, Recorder of Deeds, Regional Superintendent of Schools, County Supervisor of Assessments, Zoning Administrator, an office for the county executive and board room for county board meetings. This leaves in the courthouse the courtrooms, judges, Circuit Clerk, (and civil, felony and traffic divisions) probation officers, Public Defender, State's Attorney, victim's assistance director and

conference rooms — all related to the judicial system.

This would move offices out of the basement, where employees are becoming ill because of high levels of mold and Radon. Even though it was considered folly to suggest the old Harrington Home as a long range plan for non-judicial offices, I am still in favor of that location. It would take money to modernize it, but it is a sturdy building. If we can't get out of our lease with the city in the public safety building, we should utilize that space, but the scuttlebutt is that the city police and fire department can hardly wait for the extra space. So what's all the fuss about?

If one cares to read my detailed assessment of the Harrington Home as a possibility for expansion, please check The Zephyr online <www.thezephyr.com>, where most of my columns are available. The most obvious asset is the location. The building would complete a campus of the courthouse, public safety building, and the township and city assessor building. And that location would certainly be handier than our white elephant on East Fremont street — the old Army Reserve building, given to the county and apparently unsalable because it is military property.

At this late date, after years of indecision and inaction, I suggest forming a Public Building Commission to deal with the problem of inadequate space for county offices. The Commission must be formed with approval of the voters by a referendum placed on a General Election ballot. The wording would be, "Shall the Public Building Commission of Knox County be created and

organized (for a specific purpose) to exercise the powers and authority prescribed by the Public Building Commission Act?"

What I like about this Act is that it contains deadlines and it would allow the appointment of commissioners with expert backgrounds, such as an architect, banker, construction manager, realtor. Within 60 days of filing the resolution or resolutions organizing the Public Building Commission, the chairman of the county board, with the board's approval, must appoint at least five commissioners. They would have terms. The commission constitutes a body both "corporate and politic" separate from any public or government agency. It has the power to acquire sites, to demolish, repair, alter or improve any building within the area (county) and erect new building or buildings. It has the power to improve streets, provide for off-street parking, landscaping, contract for management and operation of buildings, rent all or any part of such buildings to other local governments. It has the power to borrow money and issue revenue bonds for express purposes.

The Public Building Commission Act is lengthy, but clear. It would provide for a professional group of people representing pertinent occupations to make decisions on space needs of county offices and then take action — all within a certain time frame.

Sounds like a good solution to me.

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