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Levy County agrees to spend money for courthouse safety improvement



Eighth Judicial Circuit Trial Court Administrator Paul Silverman speaks to the County Commission about revisions to a room to improve safety.

Photos and Story

By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 23, 2017 at 7:27 p.m.

BRONSON – By a unanimous vote, the Levy County Board of County Commissioner agreed Tuesday (Aug. 22) to seek a design-build plan to make the courthouse a little bit safer.

Right now, the maximum limit of that expense is set at \$600,000 from the Court Facilities Fund. The County Commission on Tuesday agreed with Eighth Judicial Circuit Trial Court Administrator Paul Silverman, who said it would be wasteful to invest \$1.3 million on attempted renovation, when everyone knows a new courthouse is needed.

Silverman said he will return to the County Commission for final approval, and that he is going to work with Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean to find the contractor to revamp the room that is to become a mini-courtroom.

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Commissioner Matt Brooks listens to Eighth Judicial Circuit Trial Court Administrator Paul Silverman speak about courthouse safety.



Commissioner Mike Joyner, who for six years was the bailiff for the late Circuit Court Judge David Glant, provided input that led to some revisions of Eighth Judicial Circuit Trial Court Administrator Paul Silverman's plan for the mini-courtroom.

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County Commissioner Lilly Rooks

It may be five more years, or 10 more years, he said, but Levy County will need a whole new structure – rather than trying to repair the old courthouse that has had additions and modifications over the past several decades.

Silverman saw two critical issues that need attention now, nevertheless.

The process where the circuit court judge hears cases causes a potential for danger, he said.

People who are involved with civil hearings in the Levy County Courthouse on occasion must walk down a hall where on occasion there are both suspected and convicted felons of violent crimes. And sometimes there are as many as 50 to 75 people in the hallways.

The civil circuit litigants may cross the paths of jurors, inmates, other litigants in their cases, and a gauntlet that could include lawyers as well as courthouse employees using a room for breaks and lunches, Silverman said.

The new plan is to convert a hearing room to create another mini-courtroom that will serve for circuit court hearings. This improves the logistics for all of the litigants and other members of the civil and criminal court population.

Circuit Court Judge David P. Kreider, who is currently assigned to family and civil circuit court cases in Levy County, has agreed to walk from his office to the soon-to-be-built mini-courtroom, Silverman said.

There will be a bench created for the judge, Silverman said. A witness box and an area for a clerk will be created there as well, he added. A couple of podiums and tables for opposing counsels would be installed as well.

Another revision to the room planned for this revision would be to create a separate entrance for the judge to enter. This changes the method where litigants had to walk through a long hallway to the circuit judge's office.

The other need that Silverman mentioned is a public address system to alert people throughout the building if there is an emergency. This PA system could be used for weather

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warnings, if an active shooter was in the courthouse or for other emergency issues like those.

The \$1.33 million became available to Levy County between the years of 2004 and 2008, and it has not been used during the nine to 13 years since it was available. That money will be available in the future, as best as can be determined from what was said Tuesday.

Reducing danger to the general public is what brought the call for spending money to revise the one room.

Silverman mentioned an incident in Jefferson County, Ohio very recently where Jefferson County Court Judge Joseph Bruzzese returned fire at a man who had shot him.

The judge was wounded while walking to an Ohio courthouse, and he continues to recover, according to reports.

Suspect Nate Richmond is said to have shot the judge. A probation officer is said to have shot and killed Richmond.

An audience member on Tuesday asked if judges in the Levy County Courthouse are allowed to carry concealed firearms. She was told that is permissible.

Beyond the civil and criminal functions of the Levy County Court and the Levy County part of the Eighth Judicial Circuit, which includes Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Union counties, there are other Levy County Constitutional officers with business in that building.

Levy County Clerk Danny J. Shipp, Levy County Tax Collector Linda Fugate, Levy County Property Appraiser Osborn "Oz" Barker and the Levy County Board of County Commissioners all have offices in that structure as well.

The bottom line here is that the Levy County Courthouse will be seeing some relatively minor construction to revise a room. As for the PA system for the entire building, that promises to be a more daunting project