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Courthouse security checkpoint marks 1 year

Checkpoint was added to alleviate concerns of safety in building

By Jim Osborn

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COLUMBUS — About a dozen times in the last 12 months, people visiting the security checkpoint at the courthouse front door have turned around and gone back to their parked vehicles — and returned with empty holsters.

The handguns visitors were carrying could have gotten into the courthouse before the shift



Zavadil

of the checkpoint from the second floor to the first floor door a year ago this week.

Those dozen visitors were legitimate holders of conceal-carry gun permits, but before the checkpoint's move the weapons would have been carried into the first floor of the courthouse, Platte County Sheriff Jon Zavadil said.

"A person with a gun could have taken the elevator up to the county attorney's office on the third floor," Zavadil said.

The security checkpoint's location change, a major recommendation of a U.S. Department of Homeland Security safety audit from 2010, came after several courthouse employees voiced safety concerns about security in the building.

Visitors to the offices of the county attorney, public defender, assessor, treasurer, clerk, election commissioner and the driver's examiner did not have to

pass through the metal detector before the checkpoint's move.

The county board plans to review the first year of checkpoint statistics prepared by Zavadil at its Oct. 22 meeting.

"If the purpose of the (first floor) metal detector is to keep things out of the courthouse that pose a threat, I personally think it's done its job," Zavadil said.

The checkpoint's move bolsters the security of all courthouse employees as well as members of the public conducting their business at the courthouse, Zavadil said.

Today, courthouse visitors step through a metal detector and package and purse scanner that was part of the plan to beef up security by limiting entry to the single first floor entrance outside

the treasurer's office.

The security improvements, including the scanner and metal detector and the hiring of one additional full-time deputy, cost an estimated \$76,000. The county received grant funds for the equipment purchases.

Since the checkpoint's move Oct. 1 a year ago, officers have greeted 49,303 visitors to the courthouse. They have scanned 26,344 purses, briefcases and packages during that period.

Officers have temporarily confiscated about 200 items a month, about 2,400 during the first year, including pocket knives, ice picks, Bowie knives and box cutters.

Most of those items, Zavadil said, are visitors running to the courthouse during their lunch break or after work and forget-

ting that they've got a tool from the workplace in their pocket.

Visitors are given a ticket at the checkpoint for the confiscated item and the item is returned to them when they leave the courthouse, the sheriff said.

Zavadil said officers have also made 31 arrests at the checkpoint for a variety of offenses, including carrying a concealed weapon, possession of marijuana and methamphetamine and outstanding arrest warrants.

The sheriff believes the checkpoint also has acted as a deterrent to visitors attempting to bring weapons into the courthouse.

A couple of times in the last year while high-profile trials were under way, visitors have had second thoughts about passing through the checkpoint at the front door.

Zavadil said the visitors reached for the front door, saw the metal detector, turned around, then returned to their vehicles to drop something off.

There was the suspicion the visitors were going back to their vehicle to leave a weapon, the sheriff said.