



Custer County inaugurates work on new \$3.2 million judicial center

By Lauren Sedam

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BROKEN BOW — More than a year after discussions began, the project is underway that will give Custer County residents a new space for court proceedings and legal matters.

Officials broke ground on the Custer County Judicial Center in Broken Bow on Tuesday.

The project comes from a partnership of groups throughout the county, including the Custer Campus board of directors, Custer Economic Development Corp., Custer County Board of Supervisors, state officials and the legal community. The \$3.2 million center will replace the court facilities on the third floor of the 102-year-old courthouse, said Melissa Garcia, president of the economic development corporation.

For the community, she said, it is essential.

“It’s huge for our residents,” she said. “It’s more accessible, it’s safer, and it actually serves the current needs of the court system.”

The issue was raised a little more than a year and a half ago, Garcia said, when problems began to surface with the historic court building. The old courthouse houses nearly all county offices, she said, with the court taking up the third floor.

That makes access to services difficult for some residents, she said. The old building also doesn’t have a separate entrance for inmates, so security is a concern, Garcia said. Additionally, as court needs changed and the demand for technology in legal matters expanded, it became obvious that something needed to be done, she said.

The county board then took up the issue, Supervisor Larry Hickenbottom said. They, too, realized the need for action. The county courtroom has never even had a jury box, Hickenbottom said.

They considered an addition to the courthouse, he said, but with the work that needed to be done, it would cost about \$18.5 million. “It’s such an aging courthouse that it became cost prohibitive,” Garcia said.

The focus then shifted to building an entirely new facility on Highway 2 on the site of the seven-acre Custer Campus, which also include the Mid-Plains Community College, USDA offices and Heritage Bank. The option everyone agreed upon includes a single-story facility with two courtrooms for county and district court, a hearing room and offices for the county attorney, probation officer, court clerks and support staff.

Other features of the design

worked to combat some of the former problems, said Julianna Jenkins, chairwoman of the task force for the economic development corporation and an attorney in Broken Bow.

They worked with people from the Supreme Court offices in Lincoln to learn more about the best practices for courtrooms and what some of the current needs and trends are, she said. The new facility will be handicapped-accessible, she said.

Additionally, she said, they see more mediation issues now, and with more meeting space, those needs will be met. With better technology to connect parties who are far away, she said, they will be better equipped to handle things like workers’ compensation and employment cases.

“We’re doing a lot more mediation these days, and we really wanted to take advantage of Skype and up-and-coming technologies,” she said.

The new facility also includes a secure entry for inmates with a holding room for added security.

To add to efficiency, probation offices, complete with their own drug testing facility, and the county attorney’s office will also be in the judicial center.

And to add to convenience, there will be additional

parking.

The new plan also improves the historic courthouse, Jenkins said. All of the traditional services it offered residents — from paying taxes to renewing licenses — will remain, she said, but those offices will have more room.

“While it’s a different space for the court, the courthouse will still be used for some of the traditional type of work that a county government would do,” she said.

All told, the project totals about 17,000 square feet of space, Garcia said. Custer Campus, a sister company to the economic development corporation, will fund the project up front, with the agreement that the county will lease it for 30 years, with the option to buy at any time.

Hickenbottom said the county could finance it with bonds. Work is underway, and they hope to complete the new judicial center by summer 2015, Garcia said.

The goal, she said, is for the new space to meet needs for many years to come. The new judicial center and all of its features are meant to be an investment in Custer County’s future.

“We wanted to make sure that, as we took a look at making improvements for the future, it was really the best thing for the residents,” Garcia said.