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# Hall County launches courthouse expansion study

By Tracy Overstreet

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The Hall County Board of Supervisors is seeking additional guidance on resolving a dilemma that has lasted more than a decade — what to do about the heating and air conditioning in the Hall County Courthouse and how that affects space issues in the building.

The county board on Tuesday hired Cannon Moss Brygger Architects of Grand Island as the primary project architect and Dewberry Architects as associate architects. Dewberry has a division that specializes in courthouse renovations and expansions.

The two-month analysis is



**Pam Lancaster**

tioning at the courthouse and problems with logistics on how to perform that work while people are trying to use that facility," said Brad Kissler, Cannon's principal architect. "It got involved in looking for temporary locations for courtrooms, and maybe those locations could

expected to cost \$25,000 plus reimbursable expenses.

"It's money very well spent," board Chairwoman Pam Lancaster said.

"This all got touched off with the project for the air condi-

tioning at the courthouse and problems with logistics on how to perform that work while people are trying to use that facility," said Brad Kissler, Cannon's principal architect. "It got involved in looking for temporary locations for courtrooms, and maybe those locations could

eventually become permanent locations." The county could find no leasable temporary courtroom space close enough to allow the renovation work to begin. The more than \$1 million heating and air-conditioning project should take about a year. Virtually all the pipes in the 1904 courthouse heating system must be replaced.

Hall County supervisors commissioned a study in March 2000 that revealed that \$2.6 million of courthouse infrastructure repairs were needed. Those included heating and air conditioning, as well as roof replacement, which was completed in 2010 and 2011; and window replacement, which

has not been done.

Grand Island architect Victor Aufdemberge and consulting engineer Ed Kuchirek prepared the 2000 report, which then county Supervisor Margaret Landis called "earth shattering."

Kuchirek warned 13 years ago that the courthouse infrastructure was past its expected life. If either system fails, the courthouse would be without heating or cooling, he said.

He also warned that the water pipes in the courthouse that are used for heating and cooling had become so corroded and thin that the county was risking "major water damage to records."

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Aufdemberge cautioned that the courthouse was deficient in the number of electrical outlets and exits. The building had been given a pass in meeting modern building codes because of its historical significance.

"At some point in history," Aufdemberge said in 2000, "this process went from helpful to being unwise."

But the sticker shock prevented the county board from taking much action.

"The timing is not right," Lancaster said in 2000.

Since then, the state ordered the county to add an additional district courtroom, which was placed on the first floor in a space about one-fourth the size of the third-floor district courtrooms.

Kissler said architects will need to meet with courthouse staff to determine space needs. They will evaluate a possible addition and the former Public Safety Center next door to see if it can be used temporarily or permanently.

He said Cannon Moss

Brygger has experience with the Public Safety Center. Architect Jim Cannon worked on that project when it was built in the 1970s. The firm is involved in an expansion of the Custer County Courthouse, but because it doesn't have routine courthouse experience, it found a specialized firm to assist.

Dewberry has worked on courthouse expansion projects around the country. Kissler showed floor plans, schematics and interior and exterior photos of additions to the DeKalb County Courthouse in Illinois and the Highland County Courthouse in Florida.

In both cases, additions to the back of the courthouse left the former exterior visible in open commons space. Kissler said such an addition may be possible for the east side of the Hall County Courthouse.

Supervisor Bob McFarland said figuring out whether the remaining space in the old Public Safety Center can be used is important, too.

"They will weigh the two projects for us, give us estimated costs on both and tell us if it's a viable area to use versus adding on to the courthouse," McFarland said.

Kissler said the three-story Public Safety Center, which used to house the Police Department, Sheriff's Department and jail, will be evaluated, but there are numerous challenges.

"The type of construction doesn't allow us to cut holes through the floor very well," he said. "Because it's a jail, there's not a lot of good circulation up to that upper level. ... Trying to get stairways and handicapped accessibility is going to be a challenge."

Another problem is low ceilings. The Public Safety Center was added around an older jail, and floors had to be matched between those two buildings. That resulted in some low ceilings and required steel reinforcements that make walls and floors virtually impenetrable.

While the lower ceilings were functional for offices,

they are problematic for large public spaces such as a courtroom, Kissler said.

"The windows that are in there are a challenge. The circulation is probably the largest challenge," he said of the former Public Safety Center.

But there are no preconceived notions of what will work best. All options are under consideration, Kissler said.

Cannon and Dewberry staff will prepare three to six preliminary designs and identify the pros and cons. After consulting with county staff, one to three options will be selected for refinement. Those will be brought back to the county board with a final recommendation and estimated budget, he said.

"The building we're looking at here is on the historic registry, and it's a historical icon for Grand Island," Kissler said. "We've got to be very careful on how you would potentially renovate, add on or alter that building."