

NEW COURTHOUSE, LARGER JAIL?

# Commissioners Look Toward Enlarging County Complex

BY SUSAN USHER

Commissioners plan to visit the Moore County Courthouse in Southern Pines before selecting an architect to design a new courthouse for Brunswick County.

A new judicial building is proposed as part of an overall expansion of the county complex for which \$1.8 million—about \$400,000 per year over the past four to five years—has been set aside, County Manager Billy Beasley said.

Tentative ideas include a warehouse-type storage facility to accommodate bulk purchasing, expansion of the jail and renovation of the existing courthouse facility to provide space for other agencies that are outgrowing existing space.

Board members delayed their selection last Thursday after interviewing four architectural firms with prior experience in courthouse design, including the Southern Pines firm of Austin-Stuart Architects. Carl Stuart and associate John Hawthorne invited commissioners to tour the Moore County facility.

Also interviewed Thursday at 45-minute intervals were representatives of Ballard, McKim and Sawyer of Wilmington, the firm that designed the New Hanover County Courthouse and Law Enforcement Center; John Sawyer of Wilmington, who said he did "90 percent" of the work on the New Hanover Courthouse for his father's firm before opening his own office several years ago; and MacMillan and MacMillan of Fayetteville, which designed the Cumberland County complex with

separate law enforcement and judicial buildings.

The four were screened from a pool of 10 firms to make presentations by a planning committee composed of County Manager Billy Carter, Attorney David Clegg, County Engineer Dan Shields and Commissioners James Poole and Grace Beasley.

Any new county courthouse—even if a two-story structure—would blend with existing buildings on the complex but would be more dignified than the existing facility. It would also feature more "directory" information to guide the public. Public and "staff" areas would be readily distinguishable. Within the courtrooms themselves, better separation among audience, jurors, defense and prosecution would be provided.

The county can also expect the firms to interview prospective users of the facility—from judges and lawyers to probation officers and clerk of court employees—before coming up with the final design. Space for public and court staff use will be clearly defined; casual visitors might even have trouble finding the areas they're not expected to use.

Any of the four firms will most likely encourage construction of a facility designed to meet the county's long-range needs—budget permitting. If replaced by 1988, the existing courthouse will have been in use for only 10 years.

Before the courthouse was completed, its future users already had warned that the two 76-seat cour-

rooms would be too small in which to hold court, though they registered no complaints about other space in the building.

Attorneys Ray Walton, Richard Owens and Bud Allen and the district's chief judge urged expansion of at least one of the courtrooms to the size of the old courtroom in Southport, which had a seating capacity of 125.

But no funds were available. "The only thing we can do is use them like they are and increase later if necessary," then Commissioner Pearly Vereen said.

At that time, the state's Administrative Office of the Courts had 1) recommended the move to smaller courtrooms; and 2) estimated the county would need a third courtroom by the year 2000.

At that time, Assistant District Attorney Michael Easley wrote that he could "see no possible way to hold court, district or superior, in those courtrooms."

In addition to at least one larger courtroom, agencies housed in the judicial building need more space. These include the district attorney, clerk of court, register of deeds, adult and juvenile probation, magistrate and related offices.

## Numbers Talk

Rich Little, statistical and quality control manager for the Administrative Office of the Courts, has statistics that tell at least part of the growth story.

"You will not find tremendous growth in the criminal caseload, but you will in the civil, especially

domestic," he said. The figures reflect cases filed and disposed of, not post-disposition activity or any county pattern of continuances.

From fiscal year 1978-79 to fiscal year 1984-85, the number of civil cases heard doubled. General civil cases increased from 200 to 558; domestic relations (divorce, child support, etc.) from 206 to 400; and estate cases from 176 to 403. Special proceedings have stayed fairly constant—from 207 to 239, as have the number of civil superior cases, from 55 to 77.

The number of felony cases heard in superior criminal court has increased by 25 percent, from 204 to 257 per year, while misdemeanors increased slightly from 76 to 83.

Motor vehicle cases, on the other hand, have shown a steady decline from 4,600 in 1978-79 to 3,932 last year.

In district court, the number of non-motor vehicle cases has increased from 1,929 to 2,446.

"There's no question we have to expand the jail," County Manager Carter said.

Chief Jailer Billy Gurganus agreed. "It's a combination of county growth and new laws."

In August of 1978, the jail housed 62 prisoners compared to 80 in August 1985, in September, 65 compared to 74 and in October, 52 and 102 respectively.

Daily residence ranged from up to 12 per day in 1978 to 32 per day in August 1985, he said. The jail accommodates 30 male and six female inmates. The figures given don't reflect the prisoners transferred to

facilities in other counties or to Central Prison in Raleigh for safekeeping until trial, he said.

"We've had as much as 10 overcapacity," he said. "If not for that we wouldn't be able to handle the weekend load."

New regulations require the county to house prisoners serving six months or less, rather than sending them away. However, Gurganus said the recently-adopted Safe Roads Act has placed the greatest demands on the jail facility.

"That has caused us a whole lot of trouble," he said. "Before we kept drunk drivers two or three days. Now they have to serve seven to 14 days. They're trying hard to keep alcohol off the roads."

In recent months, he added, the courts have worked well with the jail in sentencing those convicted of DWI.

## Across The Complex

Elsewhere on the complex, County Manager Carter said in a recent interview, the planning, health, job service, social services and administrative offices are out of room.

One program, Offender Aid and Restoration, is housed in a mobile office; another, building inspections, has been squeezed into the planning building. Nearly every department needs additional storage space—much of it for files the county must keep by law for designated periods of time.

A warehouse with office space will be needed if the county moves to centralized purchasing and bulk purchasing to save money. The county is looking into the possibility of mat-

ching state and federal money for development of an emergency management center.

Among the choices facing the county are whether to add a new building or expand two or three existing buildings. Each building by design can be enlarged in three directions.

"Our goal is freeing up as much space as we can with the funds available," said Carter. "No department is without space needs."

"We've been squeezed here since 1979, but only since 1981 or 1982 have we been in position to start setting aside money to expand."

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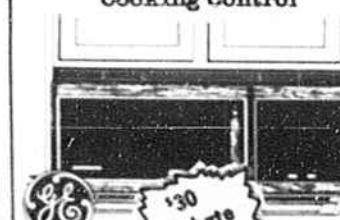
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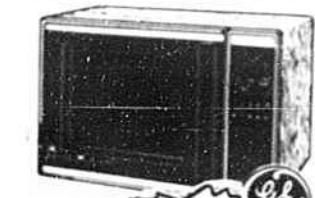
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