COURTHOUSES IN DANGER

CAN'T STAND THE HEAT

Fire presents threat to historic courthouses

By Liz Carmack

Texas' historic county courthouses project an air of stately permanence. But hidden fire dangers at some of these homes of county government could spark a disaster, similar to the fires that devastated the courthouses in Newton County in 2000 and Hill County in 1993.

While courthouse fires aren't as common today as they were in the 19th century, the threat still exists in those that have older fire detection and suppression systems (or none at all), need upgraded electrical systems or new lightning protection systems. Many courthouses contain decades-old wiring and circuitry that is easily overloaded, and expensive and difficult to maintain. Counties facing tight budgets can have trouble addressing these problems on their own.

A devastating electrical fire in the Newton County Courthouse left only its brick masonry walls standing in 2000. With help from more than $4 million in grants from the Texas Historical Commission, the county was able to rebuild. In December 2012, County Judge Truman Dougharty stands before the newly reopened courthouse. (Copyright 2014, *The Beaumont Enterprise*. Reprinted with permission.)

Fire Dangers Addressed through THC Program

Funding through the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program has helped restore 65 courthouses since its inception in 2000. Most of these received a new or updated fire suppression and fire detection system during their restoration, said Sharon Fleming, THC Architecture Division and courthouse program director. "It's often installed not only for the occupied spaces but also for the attic to protect the structure in case of a fire," she said.

The agency also ensures restored courthouses in the program have proper lightning protection systems to reduce the likelihood of a strike and, if lightning does strike, easily discharge it along a safe, direct path to the ground. New electrical systems are also almost always included as part of the restoration project.

This year, the agency had much less preservation grant money to allocate. It was only able to provide emergency grants of no more than $450,000 each to 18 recipients out of 24 applicants.

In 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature cut funding for the THC grant program to $4.2 million, a substantial reduction. In the past, funding had been as high as $62 million a biennium, and more recently $20 million a biennium. There are still 76 county courthouses with approved master plans waiting for more than $200 million in assistance from the program.

Jefferson County received one of the emergency grants from the THC this year, which will help pay a portion of the $990,246 total cost to upgrade its 14-story courthouse's fire detection system and install a fire suppression system in the 1932 building.

"We were extremely gratified that they saw fit to award us a $450,000 grant," said Commissioner Eddie Arnold. "The fire suppression system and fire alarm system had been a high priority. We've undertaken the restoration of this courthouse over the last eight or nine years now. We've been doing it in phases and paying

◀ An electrical fire destroyed the Hill County Courthouse in 1993. Rebuilding and restoration took more than six years and $9 million in funds raised from donations, grants and other funding sources.
(Photo courtesy Arthur Mann/*The* Hillsborough *Reporter.*)

Jefferson County recently received a $450,000 emergency grant from the Texas Historical Commission to help upgrade a fire detection system and install a fire suppression system in its 14-story, 1932 courthouse.
(Photo courtesy Jefferson County Historical Commission.)

for it as best we can without taking on any debt."

Fire suppression systems, often called sprinkler systems, weren't introduced regularly into buildings until the late 20th century. "Very few of the (now restored) courthouses had systems prior to going into this program," Fleming said.

Fire Risks Not Always Obvious

A leaking roof, cracking masonry or a flooded basement easily signal that a courthouse's structure is being compromised and needs repairs. But old circuitry and other fire risks may not be that apparent to those working in and visiting the courthouse, Fleming said. These less-visible threats have the potential to cause major damage.

"A lot of these existing electrical systems don't meet modern fire codes or electric codes," she said. "They're hard to maintain because they can no longer get the parts."

In 2000, faulty electrical wiring in the bell tower of the Newton County Courthouse caused a catastrophic fire that left only the brick masonry walls of the building standing.

A month earlier, Newton County officials had submitted a master plan to the THC seeking funding to help restore the 1902 Second Empire style building, including upgrading the electrical system.

After the fire, the county received two THC grants, one for $415,533 to stabilize the remaining building, and the second for $4,038,848 to go toward its $6 million full restoration. The rebuilt courthouse was rededicated in December 2012.

"The plain fact of it is there're a lot of little counties like ours that are relatively poor, and this courthouse would have never been rebuilt if we had not received those THC grants," said Newton County Judge Truman Dougharty. The county's insurance coverage also helped with construction costs, as well as with the cleaning and preservation of historic documents that had been mostly protected in the courthouse's vaults.

The rebuilt Newton County Courthouse is now ADA compliant, has fire detection and suppression systems, an elevator and a geothermal heating/air conditioning system that Dougharty said has cut the county's utility bill by 50 percent.

Newton County could have rebuilt the courthouse in a modern architectural style, but chose a historically accurate reconstruction. "In a small rural community the courthouse is the center of attention in town," Dougharty said. "In little counties you've got to have something to draw tourists."

Prior to the establishment of the THC's courthouse preservation program, an electrical fire in 1993 also devastated the Hill County Courthouse. The courthouse rebuilding and restoration took more than six years and $9 million raised from donations, grants and other funding sources. It was rededicated in 1999. The creation of the THC's courthouse preservation program was spurred by the Hill County Courthouse fire and the fact that Texas' historic county courthouses made it on the National Trust's List of Most Endangered Places in 1998, Fleming said.

Electrical issues have also plagued Tyler, Navarro and San Saba county courthouses (the latter was written about in the Feb/March 2014 issue of *County*). All have averted disaster after experiencing smoldering wiring and electrical outlets caused by overloaded circuits.

"The source of all sorts of accidents are fires caused by faulty electrical systems that are essentially overloaded," Fleming said. "Often the highest load comes during the holidays, when they decide to light up the courthouse for Christmas. But often it's an increasing load put on the electrical system by all the microwaves, refrigerators and space heaters being used. And electric space heaters have sometimes been the source of accidental fires."

Future Courthouse Funding in Question

The number of the state's historic courthouses that could receive funding assistance to address fire dangers and other problems is now up in the air. "In the first decade of the courthouse program, before state revenues slowed because of the economy, the average appropriation was more than $20 million per year or $40 million per biennium," Fleming said. "A similar amount would allow the state to once again make significant progress in the backlog of 76 counties waiting for funding."

The type of grants (if any) the THC can provide to counties during its next round of funding – whether to address only particular emergency needs or to help fund full courthouse restorations – all depends upon the amount of money budgeted to the preservation program by the legislature next year, she said.

Many of the 76 counties that await funding struggle to maintain their courthouses sufficiently, Fleming said. Consequently, their conditions can worsen each year that they're not addressed and so the sooner those counties receive construction funding, the better. ✯