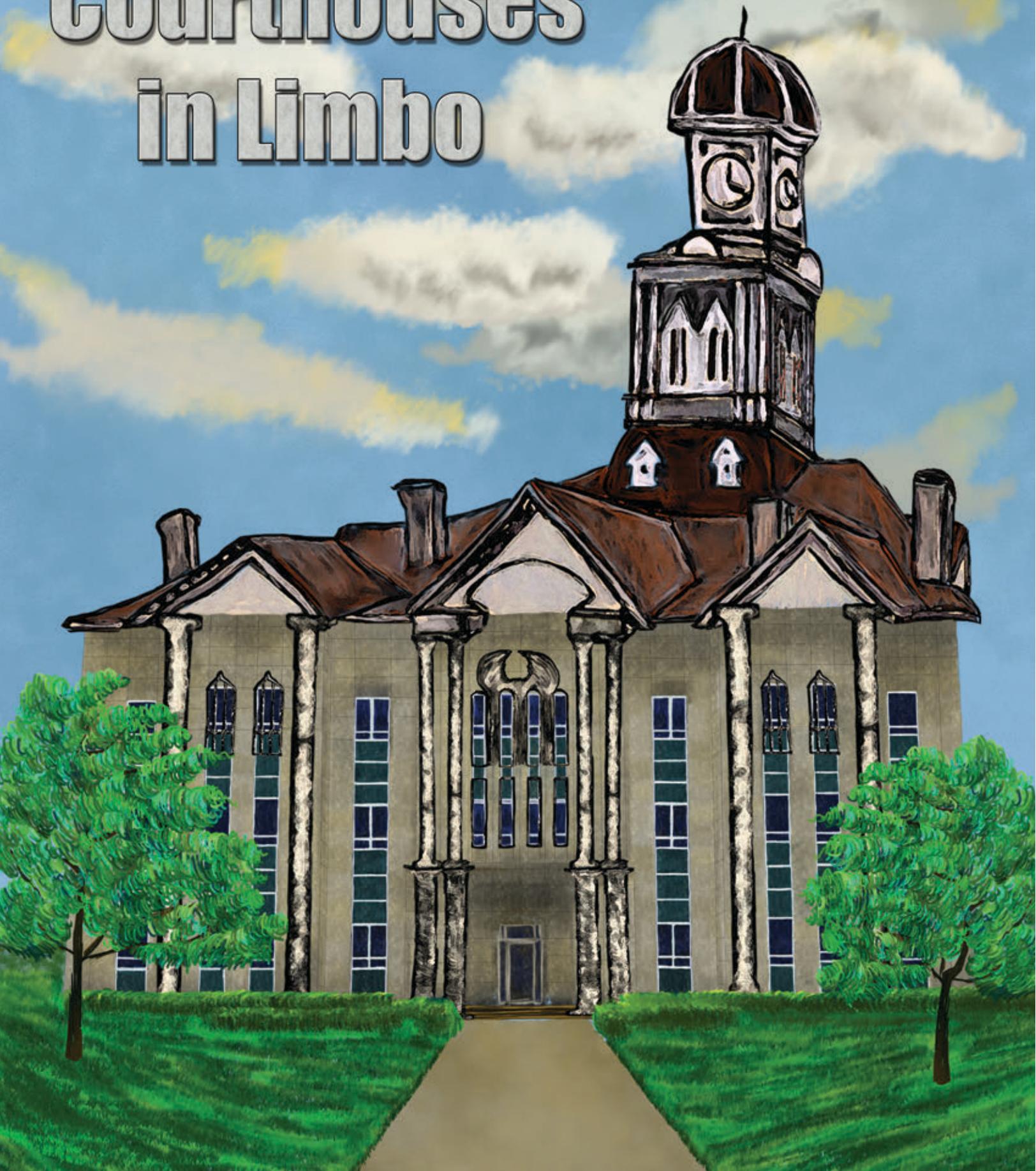


Courthouses in Limbo



Historic courthouses across the state in jeopardy without future restoration funding

By Maria Sprow

Since its inception in the 76th Legislature, the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program has restored 56 county courthouses to their original historic designs. The restorations have saved many of the buildings from deteriorating, dangerous and inefficient conditions while rejuvenating downtown areas, preserving remarkable architecture and creating sources of community pride.

But 75 more counties across the state are still qualified to receive restoration funding, and those preservation plans may be in jeopardy if the upcoming 84th Legislature does not restore funding to the program. The 83rd Legislature decreased the program's funding to just \$4.2 million for the 2014-2015 biennium. The Texas Historic Commission, which administers the preservation program, had requested \$20 million to continue with the program's mission.

"In the past, we've requested \$50 million. That's been our standard request. This last session, we asked for \$20 million because we knew that finances had been really tight, but we need a lot more than \$20 million," said Susan Gammage, the assistant director of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, adding that the funding cuts came at the end of the legislative session as the Legislature debated how to pay for the state water plan. "It was really sudden."

The program will need more vocal supporters now and during the next session to ensure that the remaining courthouses awaiting preservation don't continue to deteriorate, Gammage said.

"What's critical is that county judges understand how touch-and-go the funding is. Everyone was shocked to hear that our funding had been so drastically reduced, especially since the last (82nd) session had really been our hardest session ever and we were still awarded \$20 million," Gammage said. "Three years ago, the judges knew it was really bad. They were all calling their representatives and senators. Whereas, this last session, I think everyone felt pretty comfortable."

Because of the drastic drop in funding, the program's Round VIII grants will only be available to projects that address critical needs. Counties will have to come up with a 50 percent match for the awarded grant funding.

Gammage said she expects at least 30 counties to apply for the Round VIII grants, and that the \$4.2 million is enough to help about 20 county courthouses with their critical needs. That means some urgent problems may have to wait at least two more years. Applications for Round VIII grants are due Feb. 13.

Urgent problems faced by many of the unrestored

The Fannin County Courthouse is one of 75 courthouses in Texas currently awaiting restoration. The building, originally constructed in 1889, has gone through several transformations: it lost its clock tower in a New Year's Eve fire in 1929 and was further modernized in 1965.



Photos courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission; illustration by Maria Sprow.

courthouses include water infiltration, falling masonry, structural issues, overloaded electrical panels, outdated mechanical and plumbing systems, mold, deteriorating doors and windows, accessibility issues, fire hazards and vacancy. Once a courthouse becomes vacant, Gammage said, it's in particular danger due to the increased possibility of vandalism and arson. At least three of the courthouses are already completely vacant due to dangerous conditions, she added, and the longer occupied buildings go without restoration, the most costly the restorations become.

"Any building that is vacant is at extreme risk of being burned down because no one is around, and people just aren't aware of, 'Oh, there is a leak here, better let the maintenance guy know about that,'" she said. "Vacant buildings just start to dramatically deteriorate." ★

Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program - Awarded Grants & Unmet Needs

