COURTHOUSES IN DANGER

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I FEEL A DRAFT

Windows one of top challenges for historic courthouses

By Liz Carmack

When a blue norther sweeps through Lipscomb County, officials and staff in its drafty county courthouse brace themselves.

"Lipscomb County is in the northeast corner of the Panhandle and the only thing between us and the North Pole sometimes is a barbed wire fence," said County Judge Willis Smith.

Dozens of windows in the 1916 Classical Revival style courthouse leak like a sieve, taxing the building's air conditioners in summer and its heating system in winter, when occupants push desks away from drafts, don sweaters and rely on space heaters.

But those conditions will soon be a thing of the past. The Texas Historical Commission's Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program (THCPP) awarded Lipscomb County a $450,000 emergency grant this year to address the aged and defective aluminum replacement windows and doors in the stately tan brick and cast stone building. The county will provide another $600,146 toward the total cost of the project.

Lipscomb County has applied for courthouse program grants since 2000 to help fund a full restoration of its courthouse. In addition to addressing the windows, the county's full $3.5 million request also included new roofing, mechanical systems, an elevator and restoration of the interior. But after a substantial cut by the 83rd Texas Legislature in 2013 to the courthouse program budget, the program only had enough money to provide emergency grants to 18 recipients. The Legislature reduced the grant program's funding to $4.2 million. In the past, funding had been as high as $62 million and more recently $20 million per biennium.

"We hope they will be fully funded someday so we can apply again for the full restoration," Smith said. "But right now their money is pretty limited. We're just fortunate they selected us (for emergency funding)."

◀ The 1916 Lipscomb County Courthouse. The county will be able to replace more than 70 deteriorating windows in the building with help from an emergency grant made by the Texas Historical Commission's Historic Texas Courthouse Preservation Program.
(Photo courtesy Arthur Weinman Architects of Fort Worth.)

The county had set aside funds to pay for the window repair and restoration project but discovered lead paint on window frames and asbestos in the interior plaster repairs and in caulk used on many windows. The cost to safely remove the hazardous materials just about doubled the project budget, Smith said. The commissioners court sought the THCPP emergency grant because it thought fixing the windows was the "most practical" need to address, Smith said.

Seventy-three of the courthouse's windows will be replaced and 10 original clerestory double-cross windows in the building's courtroom will be rehabilitated, said Arthur Weinman, the project's architect. In 1972, the majority of the courthouse's original wood frame windows were replaced with aluminum frame windows with plain glass and no insulation. Corrugated sheet metal was bent to cover the gaps between the original wood frames and the new aluminum windows. Since then, water has seeped in, decaying the wood frames.

The upcoming project also includes replacing the aluminum doors, sidelights and transoms at the courthouse's two main entrances with wood versions reproduced to match the building's original design, Weinman said.

Improved Energy Efficiency Possible

"Counties often struggle with keeping their courthouse windows properly maintained, which leads to deteriorating windows that let in the elements," said Sharon Fleming, director of the THC's Architecture Division and courthouse program. "It's probably safe to say that windows are one of the top challenges counties face when it comes to their courthouse's preservation. They're subject to the full range of weather conditions, are vulnerable to wood-eating insects and require regular attention, including caulking and painting."

That's why so often their repair becomes a high priority when they are not functioning properly. Windows can account for up to 40 percent of an exterior restoration's project cost, Fleming said.

"Aside from the practical functions windows serve, they can be one of the most attractive details of a courthouse and one of the main character-defining features," she added. "And counter to some

Close up views of the rotten wood surrounding windows in the Lipscomb County Courthouse.
(Photos courtesy Arthur Weinman Architects of Fort Worth.)

common misconceptions, energy efficiency can be accomplished in sync with a historically accurate replacement and restoration."

The courthouse program recommends counties consider adding good weather-stripping and storm panels inside their windows, which can provide an insulating air pocket of two to three inches and reduce air leakage. In addition, applying a transparent window film on window panes can cut heat gain by almost half and block ultraviolet light by as much as 99 percent, she added.

Weinman said Lipscomb County's project will include construction materials that contribute to energy efficiency. "We'll use custom made wood windows with insulating, quality wood construction. These are heavier construction than house windows. I'm anticipating a higher level of comfort for the employees and it will reflect directly in their heating and cooling bills."

Smith, who's been in office since 1987, said he has visited other Panhandle courthouses restored with help from the THC courthouse preservation program, and noted they've experienced more comfortable working conditions and lower utility bills. "It made a big difference as far as I could tell," he said.

Courthouse Preservation Funding in Question

Only 18 of the 24 courthouses that applied for emergency grants received them this year. Eight counties that applied sought funding to help with problematic windows. In all, 76 county courthouses with approved master plans for full restorations remain and are hoping for more than $200 million in assistance from the THC's courthouse program. The Texas Legislature will set the agency's 2015-2016 budget during its upcoming session in 2015.

"We're happy we were selected for emergency funding and are also excited to get it done," Smith said. "And hopefully the legislature will come up with more funds. Maybe they'll be able to restore some of that money into this fund to help other courthouses that need it." ✯