DIMMIT COUNTY
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Wet Threats

Nearly 50 historic courthouses suffering from water-related problems; structures and contents at risk

By Liz Carmack

At almost 50 of the state's historic county courthouses, poor site drainage, leaky roofs, rising moisture or water seeping through walls threatens the buildings' structural integrity, equipment and sometimes even the counties' records.

The water infiltration can cause mold growth, structural movement, cracked and peeling plaster and flooding, especially during a heavy rain, something Dimmit County officials can attest to.

"On occasions after long, continuous rains, we have standing water on the floor," said Dimmit County Judge Francisco Ponce about the basement of the county's 1884 sandstone courthouse. "On the average day, there is still moisture around the walls and on the floor itself."

A high water table — recent testing near the courthouse discovered water 10 feet below the ground's surface — may be to blame for the perpetual dampness and proclivity for flooding in the basement, said County Clerk Mario Garcia.

The county has applied for a $450,000 emergency grant from the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program to help pay for a $1.25 million project that includes waterproofing the courthouse foundation, masonry repairs, replacement of windows and minor repairs to interior plaster.

"We're trying to keep our courthouse," Ponce said. "It's our pride and joy here. It's the center of all activity in Dimmit County and we're real proud of the restoration we did."

The classical revival style building was restored a decade ago through a previous courthouse program grant from the THC, but the basement water source later proved to be groundwater, which was not fully understood originally and so not addressed at the time.

"Water seems to be percolating through the (basement) walls," Ponce said. "It has caused the walls to crack, the plaster to come off and has also caused the elevator equipment in the basement to rot out." The county plans to seek additional funds from another source for the estimated $41,000 in needed elevator repairs.

Keeping roughly 100 file boxes full of probate and county court files in the basement out of harm's way is of particular concern. So far, no files have been saturated during flooding, Garcia said. But the persistent dampness and its effect on the records is a worry.

"When old records are lost or destroyed, so is our history," said THC Architecture Division and Courthouse Program Director Sharon Fleming. "County court records are an important repository of the daily workings of our counties and the state. These records hold not only vital information, but are some of the earliest known histories of Texas."

Although the basement houses no staff offices, staff and the public often visit it to retrieve records, Ponce said.

The county hopes to break ground in May on a new, three-story annex across the street from the courthouse. The county judge's office and staff will relocate to the new building upon its completion. When that happens, Garcia said he'll move the records from the basement into the courthouse's vacated first floor space.

Dimmit County Clerk Mario Garcia *(left)* and County Judge Francisco Ponce in the basement of the Dimmit County Courthouse, where water infiltration has caused damage to walls and threatens county records stored there. (Photo courtesy Dimmit County.)

◀ **The 1884 Dimmit County Courthouse in Carrizo Springs.** (Photo courtesy Billy Hathorn.)

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The 1937 Van Zandt County Courthouse in Canton. (Photo courtesy Larry Moore.)

Other Courthouses Affected by Water

In addition to Dimmit, water causes problems in at least 45 other county courthouses across the state, according to a critical needs survey conducted by the Texas Historical Commission of counties with approved Preservation Master Plans.

For instance, in Van Zandt County, basement flooding had long been a common problem after heavy rains and has damaged county records. After a downpour, water would seep into the basement, including the county's election room and the rooms where the vital records and deed records are stored, said County Clerk Charlotte Bledsoe, who took office in 2007.

"We have lost records," Bledsoe said. "We've had records that have gotten wet."

But last fall, the county was able to fund a partial waterproofing of its courthouse to successfully address the issue. Bledsoe said she is relieved. "That removed a lot of stress," she said. "I knew every time we got a big rain there was a good chance I'd find the basement flooded."

Van Zandt County is seeking a $39,000 emergency grant from the THC this year to help fund additional water proofing of its courthouse basement and to perform repairs to courthouse sidewalks to improve public safety.

THC Funds Cut

The grants made by the THC's Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program go a long way to help address a plethora of issues facing the state's historic courthouses, including water infiltration and the effect it can have on county records. But this year, the THC has much less money to work with. THC program's current grant cycle is only able to provide small grants to assist with the emergency needs of around 15 courthouses. In 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature substantially cut funding for the THC grant program to $4.2 million. In the past, funding had been as high as $62 million a biennium, and more recently $20 million a biennium.

This year, 24 counties applied for more than $7 million in grants capped at $450,000 per project for project costs over $18 million. There are still 78 counties with approved Master Plans waiting for over $200 million in assistance from the program. ★

Van Zandt County Clerk Charlotte Bledsoe vacuums water in the courthouse basement after heavy rains in July 2013 caused it to flood. Some county records stored in the area have been damaged during floods such as this one. The county successfully waterproofed this portion of the basement last fall. (Photo courtesy *Van Zandt News*.)

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