



COURTHOUSE IN DANGER

San Saba County Courthouse one of many needing emergency repairs

By Liz Carmack

Twas the night before Christmas 2007 when black, acrid smoke rapidly filled the second floor of the San Saba County Courthouse. Christmas lights, strung along the 1911 Texas Renaissance style building, had overloaded its aging electrical circuits, sparking a smoldering insulation fire. Quick-thinking county workers switched off the display in time to save the courthouse from catastrophe.

Six Christmases have passed, yet today that sub-standard electrical system remains in place. It's still not up to code and much of it dates to 1952. The hazardous situation is a safety concern for county officials and employees who work in the three-story courthouse, as well as the public engaging in a variety of business there. Every San Saba County official calls the courthouse home. "When a citizen needs something that has to do with county government, this is where they come," said County Judge Byron Theodosis.

The judge said the county was hoping to receive a multi-million dollar restoration grant from the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program to correct the electrical problems and to address the historic building's many other critical needs. But in 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature substantially cut funding for the Texas Historical Commission (THC) grant program to \$4.2 million, which means the program's current grant cycle is only able to provide small grants to assist with the emergency needs of 10 to 15 courthouses. In the past, funding had been as high as \$62 million a biennium, and more recently \$20 million a biennium.

County Seeks Money for Emergency Repairs

San Saba County is vying for one of those emergency grants, which requires the county to provide a 50/50 match. "We're very tight with money," Theodosis said. "We're very conservative, but there are some places that money is well spent. (Texas has) lost some courthouses to fires and it's easy to see how that happens. We're doing our best to prevent that here. We have the support of the community to accomplish this."

◀ San Saba County is seeking an emergency grant from the Texas Historical Commission's Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program to upgrade electrical systems and make other critical improvements to its 1911 Texas Renaissance style courthouse. (Photo by Liz Carmack.)



Judge Byron Theodosis with the obsolete plug fuse electrical panel outside San Saba County's County and District Courtroom. Workers must flip switches on this panel to control the lights in the courtroom. (Photo by Liz Carmack.)

The county is seeking a \$449,750 emergency grant and has pledged the same toward the project. The grant application states the courthouse is "a true time bomb with a fast-burning fuse." In addition to addressing the much-needed electrical upgrades, the money will help San Saba County remove trip hazards and repair damaged stairways, reconstitute severely deteriorated sidewalks and upgrade handrails on stairs to make them ADA compliant.

"Fifty/fifty is tough, but when you're looking at the prospect of burning down the building, it helps to make the extra commitment," Theodosis said, adding that the planned electrical work would eliminate much of the present danger while being designed in such a way as it won't need to be reversed should the building later be fully restored.

The county has received two grants, the first in 2009 for \$323,298 which paid 85 percent of the cost of preparing a set of construction documents for a full restoration project; the second, which was an emergency grant in 2012 and paid to repair a chronically leaky roof and rebuild two chimneys that were in danger of collapsing.

Theodosis said the county's day-to-day operations at the courthouse, given the building's pressing needs, means sometimes walking a safety tightrope. This winter, glove-wearing county workers have been running space heaters as cold winds whip in around the building's original wooden window frames. Plastic wrapping even covers some windows for make-shift insulation.



Electrical wiring, switches and panels shown in the courthouse's original service entrance that are considered a safety and fire hazard because of exposed live parts, cloth covered feeder conductors with deteriorating insulation, unlabeled equipment and other issues. (Photos courtesy Architexas.)

"The space heater is kind of like having a pet rattlesnake," Theodosis said of the one in his office. "You can't function without it. We never leave the room with a space heater on."

Courthouse Safety Issues Statewide

The issues facing the San Saba County Courthouse reflect similar challenges faced by county courthouses in other parts of the state. "Generally courthouses of this era are into their second generation (electrical) system that was installed in the 1950s or '60s," said Mark Cowan, THC project reviewer for the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program. "A lot of the panels and equipment design of the '50s and '60s has since been found to be substandard and don't meet modern code. In addition, it gets harder and harder to find the components to work on them."

"I would guess that probably more than half (of the courthouses) that have not been restored today have at least some portion of their electrical system that could be considered substandard," Cowan said.

Sharon Fleming, director of the Historic Texas Courthouse Preservation Program, said the pressing needs of the state's courthouses are many — more than 75 historic buildings still need state funding to support their preservation.

"The program does not just make pretty buildings," Fleming said. "We are providing the means to make the building as usable as it can possibly be. The projects are addressing major life safety concerns, security needs, storage problems, water infiltration and handicapped accessibility."

Theodosis emphasized that the San Saba County Courthouse isn't a museum. "All of the county offices are here and many of the (town's) businesses surround us," he said. "We have a courthouse square that remains the heart of the county. The center of commerce and the center of government are right here." *



Crumbling and cracked concrete on the building's exterior stairs and sidewalks are on the list of immediate repairs needed to improve safety at the San Saba County Courthouse. (Photo by Liz Carmack.)