Courthouse: historic past, aging present

By GERALD HAY

Since creation of Johnson County in 1855, the county court system has occupied three different facilities. The current building at Santa Fe Street and Kansas Avenue has housed the Tenth District Court of Kansas for over half a century.

**Johnson County Courthouse timeline**

In the beginning, Johnson County used space on the second floor of the Harry Case Building, which was constructed in 1859, as the county courthouse (see image 1 to the right).

Construction of the first official county courthouse building, located north of the present one, was completed in 1892 (2). County voters approved a special tax to build the impressive three-story, red brick “temple of justice” at a cost of $36,414.

Described by *The Olathe Mirror* newspaper upon its completion as “a superb structure and stands as a monument to the genius, taste and skill of its accomplished architect, George P. Washburn.” It was the first of 13 county courthouses Washburn designed in Kansas.

Construction of the current Johnson County Courthouse was finished in 1952 and at the time housed most county government departments in addition to the courts system. With nine floors and almost 235,000 square feet of space, the facility was built in four phases, starting in 1951 when the court system had only three judges and the county population was approximately 63,000.

The county made an addition to the building in 1954, followed by a third wing in 1968 (3). By 1975, the courts had expanded to eight judges and the population had increased fourfold—to more than 237,000 residents. In need of more space, that year the county added an eight-story tower onto the east side of the building (4).

Over the years, the building has evolved to address the continual need for more space, including removing the jail from the fourth floor following construction of new separate adult and juvenile detention centers in Olathe and at the New Century AirCenter near Gardner.

**An aging facility**

For more than a decade, the existing courthouse has been an unsolved problem with overcrowding conditions, accessibility and security issues and demands for future space needs for more courtrooms as Johnson County continues to grow. The county population is currently estimated at 575,000.

“As the courthouse continues to age, we’re finding that repair and maintenance activities are becoming a lot more complex and a lot more costly to initiate,” said Brad Reinhardt, director of the Johnson County Facilities Department.

“For example, there are a lot of components of plumbing systems and electrical systems that are concealed behind walls. So it requires some level of demolition to access.”

In 2014, the district court system handled nearly 18,000 civil cases; more than 6,600 criminal cases, including 89 jury trials; and 13,132 traffic cases for the Johnson County Sheriff’s Office and the Kansas Highway Patrol.

The courthouse, which sees an estimated 400,000 visitors per year, now has 19 district courts, four magistrate courts and three hearing officers. It also houses the law library, Clerk of the District Court and District Attorney’s Office.
What studies have shown
Studies and master planning in 2005 and 2008 concluded the courthouse is “inadequate and fails to meet even the current space requirements of the Johnson County Courts.” The studies cited inefficiencies in:

- Security, including movement, transportation and separation of inmates between visitors and court officials.
- Costly mechanical systems.
- Failing to meet Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.
- Serving the general public.

Studies also concluded that the county’s growth will require more space for court hearings in the future.

“We want to have an appropriate, safe courthouse for everyone who comes to the courts—whether it’s jurors or the public or people coming to do their business,” District Court Judge Thomas Foster said.

District Attorney Steve Howe agrees.

“I’ve had a number of jurors (after trials) indicate that based on the current configuration of the courthouse, that they felt extremely uncomfortable having to have so much direct contact with dangerous individuals,” Howe said.

Support for a new courthouse, including a new location to the north of the existing building, was initially endorsed by the Board of County Commissioners a decade ago, following a 2005 study.

The project was not authorized. Since then, the Sheriff’s Office and Court Trustee’s Office relocated to 588 E. Santa Fe Street in Olathe, less than a mile east of the courthouse, in 2013.

What’s to come?
Heading into the new year, plans and discussions are underway regarding a proposal to construct a new 28-courtroom courthouse north of the existing building across Santa Fe.

If the plan is approved, the existing courthouse would be razed, providing an expanded courtyard, open space between the street and the county’s administration building to the south and space for future growth.

The BOCC will review final detailed plan and funding options for the project in early 2016.

WEB EXTRA
Visit jocogov.org/JoCoMag to watch a video highlighting challenges with the current courthouse.