

Techies Will Love New Courts Building

By the Honorable David E. Cain

For barristers accustomed to dealing with the acoustically-challenged and AV-barren Hall of Justice, the new common pleas courts building will be a dream come true.

Microphones galore – both fixed and wireless – as well as ceiling mounted projectors and ceiling recessed motorized projection screens will be some of the standard fare for all courtrooms.

The AV package that recently went out for bids will also include audio systems that feature assistive listening and interpreter channels, noise masking for bench conferences and a single touch screen control in all courtrooms. The touch screens will allow for single point oversight of all audio/video systems and lighting levels.

Fixed microphones will be at all points in the courtrooms, including the jury boxes. All courtrooms will also be provided with witness and presenter video annotation as well as capability to print from a color printer located on each court floor.

Floors three through seven (the top floor) will each have four general courtrooms and two “magistrate” courtrooms (a little smaller and no jury boxes).

The second floor will hold the court's administrative offices as well as two large "special proceeding courtrooms". The "special" courtrooms will have all the same equipment as the others but, in addition, will be outfitted with high definition teleconferencing, digital audio recording and real time transcription displays, along with three wireless FM encrypted microphones.

Two AV/evidence presentation carts will be provided for each of the five court floors to be shared among the general and civil courtrooms. The second floor will have one to share. Each cart will contain a document camera, DVD player, VHS player, touch screen for annotation display, microphone and easy connection for laptop or most other video devices brought in by attorneys and witnesses.

A mobile video display cart will be provided for each court floor for use in the holding areas between courtrooms where uncooperative detainees will be able to view and hear events going on in the courtrooms.

Every courtroom in the building will have feeds for audio and video connection to the press room on the first floor and an external media pedestal along the service drive.

Two mobile video display carts with DVD playback will be provided for shared use in the jury deliberation rooms.

The press room will also be equipped for high definition teleconferencing. Most of the first floor will be used for jury pools and clerk of court offices.

Cable TV feeds will be provided to the conference/training room, the jury commission lounge, the jury managers' offices, each judge's private office, the court executive director's office, the press room and the security control room.

Electric rough-ins are being installed to allow installation of future flat panel docket displays at the public gallery entrance to each courtroom and in the building lobby.

The facility has been planned to allow full coverage for wireless data access anywhere on the premises.

"It will be state of the art, that's for sure," Administrative Judge Charles Schneider declared.

"We might tend to criticize the people who designed the Hall of Justice," he added, "but when it was built all we had were blackboards and flip charts."

Move In Date

Judges are still hoping the new building will be ready for occupancy by Christmas of this year. That way, the court could practically close down, except for duty matters, between Christmas and New Years Day when very little is going on, anyway.

Although the move will merely be across Mound Street, it would obviously be near impossible while handling dockets.

If the move cannot be done in late December, then it will probably have to occur on nights and weekends, taking much longer and causing untold additional problems.

If it can possibly be done by year's end, Judge Richard Frye, the chair of the court's construction committee, will make it happen. He is watching it closely as he has done for everything else since the project began.

Work Release

After a four-year hiatus, a work release program is again available for non-violent offenders on probation with the Franklin County Common Pleas Court.

The new program is being operated by Alvis House and is especially appropriate for offenders who deserve punishment but who owe restitution or child support that is virtually certain not to be paid if the offender is in prison.

The residents are expected to contribute 25 percent of their gross income to offset the costs of room and board.

The former work release program was operated by the court's probation department before the judges closed it on October 31, 2005, due to management and budgetary problems.

The probation department will now screen applicants who must be at least 18 years old and employed or employable. If unemployed, Alvis House will provide job search services.

Males will be housed at 2655 Jackson Pike (the former work release center). Females will be housed in another facility operated by Alvis House.

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction is helping to finance the operation with funds earmarked for prison diversion programs. Intensive Probation Officer Candace Jackson will be a liaison with Alvis House, coordinating entries and releases and verifying program compliances.

Offenders are confined during nights and weekends and must participate in several training programs.

Foreclosure Mediation

The Franklin County Foreclosure Mediation Project has reported its statistics for 2009. A total of 9,558 new foreclosure cases were filed in Franklin County last year. There were 1,883 requests for – or referrals to – mediation (including post-filing requests). As a result, 459 borrowers stayed in their homes through loan reinstatement, loan modification, foreclosure agreement or agreement prior to mediation.

Negotiations are continuing in 175 cases and outcomes are pending in 640 cases.

Mediations were completed in a total of 747 cases. No resolution was reached in 216 of those while 72 ended with foreclosure by sheriff's sale, short sale or deed in lieu.

In 312 of the cases referred, no mediation occurred because parties did not appear or declined, the cases did not meet criteria or the cases were stayed by bankruptcy.

In cases actually mediated, 61 percent were successful.

Also, notices are now being given in cases not settled to individuals who are not being assisted by counsel. The parties are warned about the disadvantages and pitfalls

of not being represented by trained attorneys and they are given the telephone numbers for the CBA's Lawyer Referral Service and The Legal Aid Society of Columbus.