

1883 Courthouse Restoration Update

By Mike Campbell, Clay County Judge

Since August 2002, Clay County Commissioners have explored the possibility of restoring the courthouse. Unfortunately, the restoration has not been a financial priority. On the second day of my first term as County Judge, Clay County experienced snowfall. I got a call that there were significant leaks in the District Courtroom and District Clerk's offices. The documents stored in these areas are historically important and essential to the business of Clay County. Considering how vital the records are, the Court allocated fifteen thousand dollars to repair the 1965 roof. Lydick roofing experts estimate that the repairs should hold us for another five years.

In January, the Commissioners had applied for and received the "Texas Historical Commission's Master Plan Update" Grant. This grant would allow us to bring the 2002 master plan current and qualify us for a six-million-dollar grant that we could apply for in 2020.

Currently, Glenda Ramsey and C.W. Farris (both Clay County residents) with Harper Perkins architecture firm, are working on the update and will have it ready to present in February 2020.

In January, I will attend a three-day THC workshop in Austin to learn more about the process of applying and what our responsibilities are regarding the grant.

In October 2019, the Wells Fargo building became available to purchase. The seventies era building is 8,800 square feet, houses three vaults, and is near the courthouse. The building had a \$220,000 price tag, which works out to \$25 per square foot. After visiting with local building owners regarding the possibility of renting office space, it became evident that the Wells Fargo building offered the best value and the most flexibility for housing our courthouse officials during the potential restoration project in the short term.

It also provided long term options as well. Whether we get the grant or not, commissioners are committed to maintaining the courthouse and doing what we can afford to restore it. Without the grant, it may take a little longer.

The most frequently asked questions include:

- *Have you purchased the building yet?*
 - Not yet, we have negotiated the contract to make sure that it meets our needs, thanks to Frank Douthitt, who donated his time and expertise. We have paid the earnest money that allows us to examine the building. Today, Jay Hollis began the inspection process and will report to the commissioners his findings. While I have toured the building, the commissioners were able to see it today for the first time since the bank closed. Many elected officials and community members who attended today's Court went through the building and brainstormed the possibilities.
 - Architects Glenda Ramsey and C.W. Farris also toured the facility today to provide expertise regarding American's with Disabilities Act compliance. They will recommend what we will need to accomplish to make it functional for our plans. Based on current construction costs and their expertise, we will have a better idea of what we would need to budget for the project.
 - If the Commissioner's Court decides that it will meet our needs, the closing date will be in March 2020.
- *If you purchase the building, what are you going to do with it?*
 - As we move forward on restoring the courthouse, several officials will need to move out of the historic courthouse for their safety and the public's convenience. They

- include the District Judge and staff, District Attorney and staff, District Clerk, staff and some records, the Probation office, Constable's office, and our maintenance staff. The Wells Fargo building will provide a more secure venue for trials and a convenient place for those who need to conduct their business with the county until the restoration is complete.
- Long term plans would be to move appropriate officials back into the courthouse so that it will continue to be a working courthouse.
 - Possibilities for the Wells Fargo building include but are not limited to, creating a law enforcement center for DPS offices. We currently provide DPS office space and staff in the annex. This arrangement might allow for the option of applying for and renewing driver licenses. Other state offices might include Game Management Officers, Texas Rangers, or many other possibilities that would increase law enforcement presence in Clay County.
 - One of the three safes could be used to expand our criminal evidence storage space.
 - There is a great need for expanded educational opportunities for Clay County residents. Such as training to take the GED test, adult literacy classes, necessary EMT certification for volunteer first responders, or college classes. I have spoken with Dr. Johnston, President of Vernon College, about the possibility of offering college-level courses in Henrietta. He is very open to the potential.
 - A community training room would also allow our Extension staff to offer training to their audience, both adults and 4H members.
 - *How are you going to pay for it?*
 - During the last budget cycle, the Commissioner's Court was able to increase the Sheriff's office budget to add additional deputies. We also added a Veteran's Service Officer to assist Clay County Veterans as they deal with the Veterans Administration, and each Commissioner was able to increase their road budget. These budget items were possible due to increased revenue from higher countywide property valuation and the Shannon Windfarm project. The Brick Plant also began paying a higher rate based on the abatement agreement with the previous Commissioner's Court. The increased revenue from the Shannon Project and Triangle brick will continue for the next seven years.
 - The Texas Historical Commission would provide six million dollars for the project. Clay County would be responsible for approximately eight hundred thousand dollars. We will argue that the funds spent to provide temporary office space are our match.
 - *What is the downside to this project?*
 - The 2019 valuation of the Wells Fargo building was \$443,520. They paid \$3,104.64 in county taxes, \$3,659.04 to the City of Henrietta, and \$5,499.64 to Henrietta ISD for a total of \$12,263.32. The combined tax rate was 2.7650000. If the 2020 valuation were adjusted to the purchase price, the new owner would pay \$6,083.00 in taxes. This amount would be a loss of total taxable revenue of \$6,180.00.

While nothing is chiseled in stone at this time, the Commissioner's Court, Elected Officials, and our staff are moving forward with the idea of restoring the 1883 Courthouse to its early grandeur. We may not go back to the original clock tower, but we will do what we can afford to provide a beautiful courthouse that will continue to serve Clay County as a place we can point to with pride.