

Planned Placerville courthouse move rattles town

By Hudson Sangree, Sacramento Bee

El Dorado County courts have called the stocky white courthouse in downtown Placerville home for over 100 years – and for nearly half that time residents have argued about whether the historic courthouse has outlived its usefulness.

The debate riled the Gold Rush-era town in the 1960s and resulted in a makeover that covered the neoclassic courthouse's interior with dark wood paneling and swapped chandeliers for florescent lights.

Today, plans call for a new courthouse to be built in a parking lot behind the El Dorado County jail, in a wooded area on the western edge of the community of 10,000 in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

"It is a building that has outlived its usefulness as a courthouse," said Suzanne Kingsbury, presiding judge of the El Dorado Superior Court.

Others think the move is misguided. The courthouse has anchored downtown Placerville since it was built in 1912, and it reliably infuses Main Street with dozens of jurors, lawyers and court employees who keep downtown restaurants and shops busy on weekdays. Tourists generally don't show up until the weekends.

Critics of the move contend there is ample room to build a modern courthouse annex with a much-needed parking garage, while rehabilitating the historic courthouse.

Kirk Smith, a downtown property owner whose family has been in the Placerville area since the 1840s, has led the fight

against moving the court.

“It has to do with pride. That’s our heritage. It’s part of our DNA,” Smith said. “People come to Placerville because of what’s old, not what’s new.”

In 1965, grand jurors recommended replacing the old courthouse because of seismic instability, he said. That caused a public outcry and resulted in the courthouse being renovated.

This time, the plan to move the court hasn’t caused such a stir, but there are those who think it’s a bad idea and would siphon dollars that keep downtown’s restaurants and shops afloat.

Main Street business owners say a significant portion of their sales, up to 30 percent in some cases, come from customers who work in the courthouse or residents who are called for jury duty. During the court’s long lunch break, they eat, shop and stroll Main Street, often coming back on the weekend with friends, they said.

Albert Fausel co-owns Placerville Hardware, billed as the oldest operating hardware store west of the Mississippi and one of the longest-operating businesses in California. He and other merchants said they felt excluded from the debate over the courthouse’s fate by public officials intent on a new building despite public sentiment.

Fausel said an addition to the existing courthouse would have been a better option.

“They’re spending so much money (to build a new courthouse),” he said. “I think they could spend the money down here and help the merchants. I don’t know why they’re taking it away from us.”

Preservationists have sued the state Judicial Council to stop the project, saying a legally mandated environmental analysis overlooked the potential for urban blight if the courthouse

moves.

“The (environmental impact report) failed to adequately disclose, analyze and/or mitigate the Project’s economic impacts to the businesses in historic Placerville on Main Street that will lead to urban decay,” says the complaint by the Placerville Historic Preservation League.

The case, brought under the California Environmental Quality Act, is pending in San Francisco Superior Court and could be decided soon. Courthouse construction, which was scheduled to start next year, is on hold pending the outcome.

In a legal brief filed by the Judicial Council and El Dorado County, lawyers argued that there is no real evidence that the court’s relocation would lead to blight. Plans call for the 1912 courthouse to be left standing and reused in a way that will enhance the local economy and draw people downtown, the attorneys said.

At the same time, construction of a new 88,000-square-foot courthouse will improve the county’s criminal justice system by providing modern facilities with holding cells, jury-assembly rooms and ample security, the lawyers said. Its location next to the jail will make bringing defendants to court much easier and save money, the lawyers wrote.

Placerville City Councilwoman Wendy Thomas said she understands the concerns of business owners but is certain the ornate white courthouse needs replacing.

“She’s a shining jewel in the center of our city and she’s a mess inside,” Thomas said.

The court’s move should be looked at as an opportunity to reuse the old building in a way that would draw visitors to Placerville on weekdays and at night, Thomas said. She suggested it might be turned into a boutique hotel with a restaurant or a performing arts center.

One expert suggested the move might not have the long-term benefits that advocates envision, however.

Ray McDevitt, a retired lawyer who wrote the book "Courthouses of California: An Illustrated History," said courthouses such as Placerville's were traditionally the center of small towns, and not just for symbolic reasons.

"It was an economically sensible decision," McDevitt said. Lawyers and others using the courthouse had offices downtown, as they still do. Hotels and other prominent public and commercial buildings often shared a square with the courthouse. Centralizing functions made sense.

These days counties around the state are building new justice facilities on the outskirts of towns, including in Auburn, Roseville and San Andreas, the county seat of Calaveras County.

New suburban courthouses might seem logical in the short run by providing ample space and easy access to the county jail, McDevitt said, but he doesn't think they'll last 100 years.

"Land at the fringe of a community is cheaper and you can have a huge parking lot," said McDevitt, who practiced local government law in San Francisco for decades.

The trend, however, is oddly retrogressive, like building shopping centers in the 1950s and 1960s on the edges of cities, he said. The current return to city centers and away from car-based culture is more economically and environmentally feasible going forward, he said.

"The flight to the suburbs is sort of over, I think, as an urban design formula," McDevitt said. "A lot of places are spending time and energy to revitalize the cores of their communities. So to take a functioning governmental institution and remove it from a place where it's visible, understandable and accessible seems going against the grain."

“I think that in another 30 years,” he said, “the decision to remove courthouses to remote locations will be looked at as errors.”

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Kirk Smith

A number of local politicians pushed closure of our historic courthouse with outrageous claims like councilmember Wendy Thomas telling folks that the state wanted to move our courthouse to Rancho Cordova and that if local government did not support this project now, our courts would lose \$90 million and would no longer be high on the list for new construction. But court authorities have said those statements are absolutely false, but neither Thomas nor any of the rest

have shown the personal integrity required to correct those and a series of other lies.

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Kirk Smith

There were no public hearings this time, no public input, just the usual backroom deals where politically connected people are slanted to make huge sums if their scheme to build on property near the jail goes through. Instead they could do what has been done in California and throughout the nation to save old courthouses, expand older courthouses with an annex as would work here since the adjoining public property could allow for increasing court space by at least three times.

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1 day ago

William Howard

Many of these old courthouses were built at the sites where public executions took place before the state took over that task from the counties. An example is the beautiful old courthouse in Placer County that you can see as you drive through Auburn on I-80. It was built at the site of the gallows used for the first three legal public executions in Placer County. The three murderers were buried under the gallows after their executions. I have always wondered if they moved the graves to a cemetery before they built that courthouse or if their bodies are still moldering beneath it.

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William Howard

It seems to me that a compromise could be reached that would make both sides happy. Keep the old courthouse for civil actions and maybe traffic tickets and build a new courthouse for the criminal actions.

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