

Lawyers object to supervisors' plans for county courthouse

Attorneys to appeal decision to not return Circuit Court to Courthouse

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About 40 of Oxford's attorneys passed a resolution Tuesday in support of returning the Lafayette County Circuit Court back to the Lafayette County Courthouse once renovations are complete.

Members of the Lafayette County Bar Association met at the Lafayette County Chancery Building to discuss the decision announced Monday by the Lafayette County Board of Supervisors to move the Justice Court to the iconic courthouse instead of returning the Circuit Court there, which has been holding court there since the late 1800s.

The resolution, passed unanimously, states the Bar believes the supervisors' plan does not provide for the highest quality of justice, nor does it meet the needs of all the parties involved in the legal system.

The resolution also points out that it was the intent of the former Board of Supervisors to return the Circuit Court back to the courthouse after the renovations were complete.

"Many resources have been spent in an effort to equip the

Lafayette County Courthouse for the necessary technology requirement for Circuit Court, including video equipment and computer equipment," the resolution states. "Further, specific modifications were made to accommodate the detention of prisoners ... these resources will be wasted as they are not needed by Justice Court and Drug Court."

In a 3-to-2 vote, the supervisors approved a motion to move the Justice and Drug courts to the Lafayette County Courthouse, along with allocating space for civic and nonprofit organizations, including the Heritage Foundation and an office for the U.S. House of Representatives First Congressional District seat holder.

There are also plans to house an office for the Oxford-Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce for a tourism center. Supervisors Mike Pickens and Robert Blackmon voted against the motion.

The Bar will also be filing a motion to appeal the decision in the Circuit Court. It has 10 days from Monday to file the appeal.

"The Bar Association feels that utilizing the Courthouse for anything other than the Lafayette County Circuit Court is a waste of taxpayer dollars and jeopardizes the safety of the public," said Bar president Brooke Newman.

"Millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent to renovate the Courthouse specifically for the Circuit Court. Additionally, and just as important, the Chancery

Court Building simply does not have the security and safeguards necessary to carry out the criminal operations of the Circuit Court."

Local attorney Kevin Frye called the supervisors' decision "irresponsible and politically motivated."

"This is an issue of great importance to all the lawyers in this town," he said.

Defending decision

Supervisor and board president Lloyd Oliphant said he stands by his decision and that he voted for what he felt was best for Lafayette County on the whole, and not just one group of people.

"I realized no matter how the vote turned out, someone on the other side would have discomfort," he said this morning.

"My decision was based on saving the county money. We do not have to build another building for the Justice Court, although we have to do some rearranging. At the end of the day, the two jury-boxed courtrooms and the office space we have revived, will be more than adequate, as much, if not more so, than all the other places the Circuit holds court."

Oliphant said while the courthouse has two courtrooms, one of them is very small and not adequate to hold circuit court in.

"It's my desire to give everybody who needs space, adequate space," Oliphant said. "I have to watch out for the entire county and the entire county budget

and do what I feel is the best thing for every citizen of this county."

The resolution called the decision "based on politics."

This is not the first run-in the supervisors have had with the Circuit Court since the term began in January.

Earlier in the year, Supervisors Ray Sockwell Jr. and Robert Blackmon said they had received complaints against the two public defenders for Circuit Court and wanted to address the process of hiring public defenders. Circuit Court Judge Henry Lackey told them it was his job to hire the public defenders, via recommendations for the Lafayette County Bar.

Both Lackey and Circuit Judge Andrew Howorth said they were satisfied with the current public defenders' work.

Sockwell asked County Attorney David O'Donnell to contact the county Bar Association and ask them to send a list of recommended attorneys.

As of this morning, no changes have been made in the public defender's office.

In March, a supervisor removed a coffee pot and television from a room that is used by the Circuit Clerk's Office to serve jurors coffee and as a holding area for witnesses and defendants in criminal court proceedings. It was unclear who moved the items and for what reason, but the discussion alluded to it being someone seeking office space.

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