

Soaring Courthouse Costs Symbol Of Worst of State's County System

By Marvin Olasky
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The rusted girders of the half-completed 10-21-27-40-45-? millions of dollars Middlesex County Courthouse have stood exposed to East Cambridge passers-by's eyes all Summer.

In the past few weeks, opponents of soaring courthouse construction costs; groaning over what they call monuments to an anachronistic system, have resumed the call for

changes in Massachusetts county government.

They cite, for example, the case of Essex County's Haverhill courthouse, opened just last year and cooled by a faulty pipe system, which on some days leaks water through a perforated ceiling and forces the judge to preside beneath an umbrella.

A bill is before the state Legislature seeking \$50,000 to correct the problems of the \$850,000 courthouse — originally supposed to cost \$550,000 — in which \$2700 was spent for wall-to-wall carpets in private offices, \$775 for drapes and shades in the judge's and clerk's

offices and \$140 for five wastebaskets. The \$28 wastebaskets were later returned.

When county critics stop moaning over Essex County's monsoon court, they start yelling about Middlesex County's Somerville courthouse, for which 20 wastebaskets were purchased, costing \$36.72 each.

The Somerville courthouse, it seems, also boasts of a \$100 statue of the "Boy With the Peasant Costume," a sauna bath, a \$580 grandfather's clock, two \$2000 wood carvings depicting "Justice" and

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"Moses," two \$2400 custom-made marble tables in the main foyer, a \$225 fireplace set, two \$125 sand urns for cigarettes and \$1100 chalkboard, a \$500 high intensity cooking range used by court offi-

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cials to prepare their lunches, and, of course, a \$145 pedestal for the statue of the "Boy With the Peasant Costume."

The Somerville court's Georgian edifice itself, finished last year, was supposed to cost \$550,000 when proposed in 1965, was authorized by the Legislature to cost \$750,000, and ended up costing somewhere between \$1,450,000 and \$1,864,000 to Middlesex county taxpayers — no one has had the mathematical dexterity to total up the multiplying costs so far.

And that estimated total does not include the \$1.5 million paid by the state to oust 28 families in the Bailey rd. section of Somerville, an ouster which many uprooted persons said was cruel and unusual punishment and unnecessary as well, since equally good land was available at far less cost elsewhere.

Several years ago the presiding justice of Middlesex county's Marlboro court asked for a new chair for his bench because he found it "embarrassing" to fall out of his antique chair every few days.

So Middlesex County built him a new courthouse which was supposed to cost \$750,000 and has just been opened at a cost of \$1,200,000. In all fairness,

the case load in Marlboro has tripled in the past 18 years and the old court was located in a 68-year-old downtown building shared with the Police and Fire Departments.

Other recent Middlesex County expenses include \$425,000 and \$1,550,000 to enlarge the Framingham and Lowell courthouses respectively. New courthouses are planned for Ayer and Concord.

Taxpayers of Middlesex villages and farms generally realize that most of the old courthouses in the county are overcrowded and antiquated. They realize too, the need for some new construction. They object to cost overruns and other hard-to-explain expenses.

Woburn Mayor Edward F. Gill, for example, wonders why the Woburn court's payroll suddenly jumped from \$230,465 in 1968 to \$316,832 in 1969 when a courthouse was opened, if not to satisfy some law that the number of court officials expands to fit the pace.

So it goes around most of the state. Essex County's Lynn courthouse, yet to be built, is expected to cost at least \$2.2 million, some \$700,000 more than the original authorizations. And



RAINDROPS KEEP FALLING — Judge Arthur A. Thomson, with umbrella, and Clerk Harvey Pothier protect themselves from leaky pipe system at \$850,000 Essex County's Haverhill courthouse.

Rep. Lawrence P. Smith (D-Lawrence), who heads the Legislature Committee on Counties and has seven members of his family on county payrolls, has fled legislation calling for \$100,000 to be spent to develop plans for a new Essex County superior courthouse, which could cost \$15 million.

Plymouth County "isn't like those other counties," according to County Treasurer Frank Randall. "It's a good county." True enough, the recent renovation of a

Brockton Knights of Columbus hall into a district courthouse was expected to cost \$1.15 million and did cost \$1.15 million.

The K of C building itself, it was revealed two years ago, was purchased for \$150,000 although the building had been appraised by two real estate brokers acting for Brockton as being worth less than \$100,000.

Some critics of county courthouse construction costs are beginning to fight back.

For example, an elaborate plan for a \$1.7 million renovation of Middlesex County's Malden courthouse was trimmed two-thirds by a committee of state representatives last Spring. They endorsed a \$550,000 renovation program instead.

Lincoln selectmen stormed several weeks ago over "The burden imposed on local property owners by the county clique, their lack of responsibility and responsiveness, and the intolerable waste . . ."

Mayor Gill is calling for "the outright abolition of county government in Massachusetts."

"It's not just the courthouses," he continued. "Why does it cost the county farms \$1.87 to produce a quart of milk?"

"You don't cure a cancerous growth by feeding a person aspirin," he said, "you need radical surgery. We should set up a special agency for the court and penal systems and throw out the rest."

The state's body politic will not receive such a cure very quickly, it seems. Governor Sargent introduced into the Legislature on July 23 a bill providing for state review and partial assumption of county government costs.

The measure, according to Sargent, would "bring to an end, once and for all, the inequitable and irresponsible system whereby one body of men determines how much the counties will spend and then leaves to officials at another level of government the responsibility of raising the funds to pay the bill."

Two mayors who have had close looks at courthouse construction testified in favor of the bill. Somerville Mayor S. Lester Ralph, charging that "county governments in Massachusetts have been guilty of gross financial irresponsibility because they need not answer to the people who pay the bills," supported Sargent's measure as an "effective means for reviewing and controlling" rising county expenditures.

Haverhill Mayor James F. Waldron — citing the \$61,794,384 assessed Massachusetts cities for county government costs in 1970, up more than \$19 million in two years — spoke for the Massachusetts League of Cities and Towns in support of Sargent's measure.

The bill today is "technically alive, but it doesn't look very hopeful," according to a spokesman for Sargent.