

# Saga of Middlesex courthouse sags to an end

Dexter Brine; Joan Mahoney

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By Dexter D. Brine  
and Joan Mahoney  
Globe Staff

The word is that the Middlesex County Courthouse will open for business (partially) on Feb. 19 (maybe) on a day that will (definitely) not be marked by a gala celebration.

"There may be something," said Middlesex County Comr. Paul

Tsongas gloomily, "but it will be more like a wake than a party.

"I think this building has sounded the death knell of county government."

No ribbon-cutting at the foot of

the elegant staircase in the entrance hall? No plaque to dedicate this king of courthouses, whose tower soars 22 stories into the sky?

"From what I hear," says a Cambridge observer, "a new delicatessen would have a better opening day."

A joyless, low-paced opening for Middlesex County's costliest building fits right into the saga that started eight years and eight months ago.

The courthouse was scheduled to be built in the late 1960s; it will open in 1974.

It was to cost \$16 million; the latest estimate is \$76 million.

It was destined to replace the old red-brick East Cambridge Courthouse with a huge complex — the new 22-story building, plus two wings to house the probate court and the registry of deeds, a parking garage, and a tree-edged mall.

Now the wings, garage and mall may never be built and history enthusiasts are calling for preservation of at least a portion of the present building.

It is topped by a two-story jail so full of "bugs" that Sheriff John J. Buckley says it is "totally inadequate."

When the rest of the building opens, the jail won't. When will the inadequate conditions be corrected? Not even the sheriff knows.

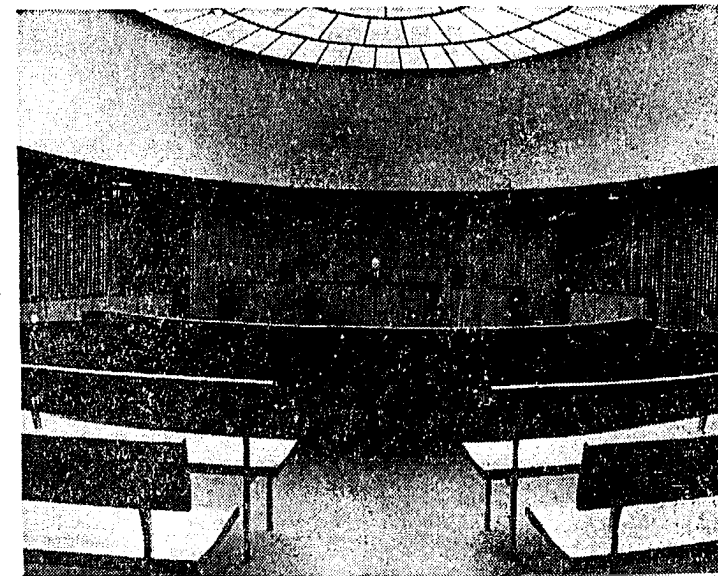
The problems, according to Buckley, are almost without number. They include a leaking roof and difficulties with ceilings, the control room, chairs, the recreation area and the kitchen.

How, officials are wondering, to get prisoners out of the high-rise jail in case of fire? No piece of fire-fighting apparatus now made can pluck people from the 18th to 22d floors of a building. Perhaps a helicopter could, but helicopters don't carry crowds. In case of a fire, prisoners would be threatened by another danger. Some of the materials used in construction and furnishings in the jail area, says the sheriff, have been found to give off deadly gases when burning.

Over its years of halting and halted construction (one winter, the only action at the site for weeks was the "dripping of rust from girders"), various groups eyed the courthouse with lively and often official curiosity.

Investigations were initiated by the Supreme Judicial Court, the state Senate, the State Police, the Massachusetts Bar Assn., taxpayers' groups and legislators.

Last year, three men were named to a Middlesex Courthouse Review



Visitor sits at desk set aside for court clerk on bench of circular courtroom in new Middlesex County Courthouse. (Globe photo by Bill Curtis)

Board. They met just once, long enough to resign.

Though millions had been spent on the courthouse, they said the Legislature wouldn't vote them enough money to carry out properly their charge of overseeing future spending.

In the years since it was started, the courthouse has served as background for a large and shifting cast. County Comrs. John F. Dever Jr. and Frederick J. Connors, who played major roles in the early years of the courthouse, lost last year's county election to reform candidates S. Lester Ralph, mayor of Somerville, and Lowell City Councilman Paul Tsongas.

Gevyn Construction Corp. of Maroneck, N.Y., low bidder (at \$22 million) in 1967, suspended work on the job in 1970, charging nonpayment by the county. Gevyn workers were replaced by the DeMeo Construction Co. of Providence, but Gevyn is still part of the courthouse picture. A Gevyn suit for \$11 million in damages is still in arbitration.

Throughout the long, slow years of courthouse construction, one figure remained unchanged. Architect Edward J. Tedesco was hired in 1962 for a project that seems, in view of what finally was built, quite modest: an 18-story courthouse in East Cambridge. Through revisions — always calling for bigger size and more cost — Tedesco stayed with the courthouse project.

Moving has tentatively been set for the Washington Birthday weekend — with the first boxes crossing the street on Feb. 14.

And there'll be plenty of boxes. One of the distressing aspects of the courthouse saga, according to a veteran of 26 years in the old courthouse, is that the cost and incompetence has drawn so much attention that one fact has gone almost unnoticed. "It's a simple fact. The new courthouse was needed," he says. "It didn't have to be so large, so costly, so elaborate, but it did have to be."

Mayor Barbara Ackermann of Cambridge has added another thought on the opening of the courthouse: parking in the area is so tight, she says, that by March only residents will park there, with permits. What of courthouse traffic, now to be swelled by attorneys and families visiting prisoners in the jail?

For that matter, what's going to happen to the old courthouse? Historically, it has value. It's built where the British stepped onto the Cambridge shore to start their march to Lexington and Concord.

In the old jail, which stood at Spring and Third streets, there were dungeons where once the insane were chained to walls. To this day, the great timbers which formed the gallows of the Cambridge jail lie in one corner of the courthouse basement.

The final chapter in the story of the greatest monument to mismanagement in county history is years away — possibly, generations away.

Financial experts estimate that, at the very least, the courthouse's costs will not be paid off before 1991.



New Middlesex County Courthouse soars 22 stories into the air. (Globe photo by Jack O'Connell)