



Jail facilities at high-rise Middlesex Superior courthouse (left) in Cambridge will not be used, Sheriff John Buckley says, until they meet safe-

ty and fire requirements. Chapel (upper right) and women's dorm await inmates. (Charles Carey, William Ryerson photos)

Chief describes Middlesex Courthouse as 'high-rise waiting for fire to happen'

By Frank Mahoney and Joe Pilati
Globe Staff

Poetic justice is what some critics of county government called it when the new Middlesex Superior Courthouse, towering 22 stories over East Cambridge, finally opened 18 months ago — on April Fool's Day.

With a price tag that escalated from the original \$16 million estimate in 1963 to more than \$76 million (including interest that county taxpayers will be paying through 1991), the courthouse project has long been considered a textbook case of the cost-overruns phenomenon often associated with certain Defense Department weapons systems contracts.

And now, Cambridge Fire Chief William Cremens, whose department will have primary firefighting responsibilities in the event of a blaze at the courthouse, is calling the building a "high-rise just waiting for a fire to happen."

His remarks came in an interview last week after Sheriff John J. Buckley, who has termed the courthouse a "fiasco that never should have been built," announced he would not allow the opening of the top four floors — earmarked for county jail facilities — until the building is made safer against fire and against escapes.

The courthouse is a 25-story structure, with three floors built below ground level. Facilities open to the public since April 1, 1974, include 14 Superior Courtrooms, seven District Court rooms, the district attorney's offices, the probation offices of both courts and the offices

of the county engineers, commissioners, the treasurer and the retirement board.

The building has been the subject of civil suits, criminal investigations and arbitration involving thousands of legal exhibits of blueprints, contracts and letters.

In June 1973, a Middlesex County grand jury finished a year-long probe of the construction cost overruns without fixing the blame for them. Earlier, a special legislative commission held lengthy hearings on the same matters, but disbanded without issuing a report.

Still other investigations by the Massachusetts Bar Assn. and the Supreme Judicial Court were cut short because of "pending legal actions" during the construction phase, which was marked by charges and countercharges about shoddy workmanship, frequent hiring and firing of contractors and attempts by the county commissioners to secure funds from the Legislature.

According to Chief Cremens, the building has only a few windows, no sprinkler system, no smoke ventilating devices, no fire doors and an open staircase with low rails running up the entire edifice.

The building "would never pass inspection under the Cambridge (fire) codes," the chief said. "But it has been approved by the state fire marshal, and since it's a county building, it does not have to conform to city standards."

Buckley, meanwhile, said he cannot allow the jail facilities to be used until heat and smoke detectors are connected into the city fire alarm system; a smoke evacuation

system is installed in the stair ways; the open staircase is enclosed and security barriers are built between a false ceiling and the concrete ceiling on the 17th floor.

By opening a ceiling panel anywhere on that floor, the sheriff said, a person "could swing up into the three-foot crawl space and go across until they were over the gun room," used for weapons storage. The removal of another ceiling panel would allow a person to "drop down into the gun room," he said.

During a tour of the top floors last week, Buckley pointed out what he called the "extravagant" kitchen which occupies half of the 18th floor.

"We could feed the city of Cambridge with this setup," he said, "and yet, at most, the jail can only hold 128 persons. In fact, there are seldom more than 85 persons confined to the jail at any one time."

The cooking area includes two, 8-by-10-foot standing refrigerators and three 10-by-10 foot walk-in freezers as well as a bakery equipped with several large ovens.

The building also offers spiritual sustenance in the form of an all-brick chapel on the 19th floor. However, Buckley estimated that no more than five prisoners have ever attended a religious service at one in county facilities and he does not expect that situation to change.

The upper floors include two types of cell blocks — regular and "disciplinary." The latter, each 6 by 8 feet, contain no beds, no desks, no mattresses and no toilet facilities except holes in the floor. Flushing is controlled by guards.

In the regular cell block, the

cells measure 39 square feet while the latest Massachusetts standard is 55 square feet per cell. According to Buckley, "Compared to this place, Charles Street Jail (in Boston) is a castle."

Mattress fires — a common problem in jails everywhere — are one of the things Buckley said he fears most. "There's almost one a night at Walpole," he said. "If we had one in here, I don't know how we could handle the smoke since there are no windows."

In a section of the jail reserved for women, toilets and a single shower are in a large, open room with no partitions. A guard in a control room would have a direct view of the bathroom facilities, Buckley noted.

With the women's beds only three feet apart in an open dormitory setting, Buckley feels there may be a violation of health regulations. "But the county felt they weren't bound by anyone else's rules," he said. Other apparent fire hazards cited by Buckley include wall-to-wall synthetic carpeting throughout the courthouse, plastic chairs and cushions and wooden desks, benches and chairs. Noise levels in the jail "are likely to exceed standards" of the Federal Office of Safety and Health Administration, which could compel the county to insulate the cell blocks, Buckley added. The sound of cell doors closing last week was compared by some observers to freight trains hooking up. Despite all of these problems, Buckley said he hopes the jail facilities can be occupied by next spring. "But," he cautioned, "it's going to cost more money."