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Interest lags on future of courthouse

By Chris Daley

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What to do with the historic county courthouse on Main Street in Placerville has been a hot and cold topic among locals for years. The Superior Court, a division of the state's judicial system, has used the building since it was built in 1913. Now, however, due to the facility's many antiquated features and amenities, the state plans to relocate that function.

El Dorado County owns the building and has authority over its disposition. The city of Placerville has an obvious interest in what happens to it. Based on those concerns, the two jurisdictions agreed to form a Blue Ribbon Committee last year to study and propose a number of possible options. That committee has not yet been formed, and the deadline to make and submit an application to be a member is today, Friday, March 13 at 3 p.m. The deadline applies to both the city and the county.

As of Wednesday this week, only six people had turned in an application, according to City Manager Cleve Morris. He told the Mountain Democrat that, as conceived, the committee is to have 10 members including three city residents, three county residents and four Placerville business owners. Completed applications are being collected at City Hall, Morris said. Also, as of Wednesday, there were no plans to extend the sign-up period beyond today.

If needed, "We may be able to open it up on a staff level," Morris said, noting that approval by both governing bodies, the county Board of Supervisors and the Placerville City Council may not be required to create the extension "for two or three weeks."

Kelly Webb is the county's lead person on the project. A principal analyst in the Chief Administrative Office, Webb responded to the Mountain Democrat via e-mail and provided some history and background of the committee.

"The origination of the Blue Ribbon Committee started with a Board of Supervisors agenda item on Sept. 9, 2014, item 23," she wrote. "Since the county retains ownership of the building and the building is acknowledged as a significant component of the downtown/city of Placerville economy, we wanted to begin the discussions on how to best transform the building and keep the downtown economy intact. Following approval of the item by the Board of Supervisors, I believe the item also went to the City Council. From there the topic was discussed in the county/city 2X2 meetings. As a result of those ongoing conversations, the structure was developed for the Blue Ribbon Committee."

The "2X2" is a planning and conferring system that includes two members of the Board of Supervisors and two members of the City Council.

Supervisors heard the matter again in early February and authorized the wording and language to be used in the application and description of the committee's task. It had been heard by the City Council a week or so before, Webb recalled.

"This is somewhat of a joint effort, but the city of Placerville took the lead on advertising for the committee and accepting the applications. I posted the application on the county Internet page on Feb. 11 and again this week," she noted.

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Assuming that at some point a reasonable number of applications are turned in at the city, eventually the 2X2 panel members will review them and forward recommendations to their respective governing bodies, Webb explained.

Both Morris and Webb expressed surprise that, so far, there has not been more interest shown in serving on the committee.

Sue Taylor, owner/restorer of the historic Hangman's Tree Building and the adjacent Herrick Building on Main Street two blocks west of the courthouse, wrote the following in a letter in December to the Administrative Office of the Courts, the state agency that directs development of court facilities. In part, Taylor said:

"The historic courthouse is an integral and central part of the economic, social and cultural life of the city, and its abandonment would cause irreparable damage to the city. If the courthouse moved to a new location, the Public Defender's Office, the District Attorney's Office, the CASA office and numerous attorneys and other services adjunct to the judicial system would soon follow, leaving downtown Placerville a blighted ghost town. The city would be hard pressed to maintain its historical gold rush mining town ambience without its courthouse. The significant negative economic impacts and the introduction of blight created by more empty building on Main Street and its effect on the community would be an unmitigatable impact."

In addition to Taylor, other Main Street merchants and building owners spoke at Tuesday's City Council meeting in opposition to moving the court function out of downtown. Nancy Duncan, co-owner of the Bookery said, "losing the courthouse would be a blow to downtown." Representing "the city's revenue," Duncan told the City Council, "We are swimming upstream and would like your support."

Pat Blackwell, owner of two buildings that include Sierra Western Wear, said it was its history that attracted her to Placerville.

The Bookery's other owner Celia Lux complained that with the courthouse gone, Main Street "could end up with a bunch of cutesy boutiques that don't serve the residents anymore but just the tourists."

Downtown building owner Kirk Smith told the Mountain Democrat months ago that moving the court facilities and its related offices and staff would "devastate local business." He estimated that some businesses would lose up to 20 percent of their revenue.



Comments

6 comments