

NEWS

## Broward courthouse employees sue over working in 'sick' building

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Nineteen current and former employees of the Broward County Courthouse have sued the county, arguing the building is "sick" and so are they.

The employees say the county's courthouse in downtown Fort Lauderdale is infested with toxic mold and that tiny asbestos fibers float through the air, exposing the public and the employees to health dangers. They want financial compensation for their illnesses, and they want the courthouse evacuated, among other requests.

"I think the county totally neglected this courthouse," said attorney and former state Sen. Skip Campbell, whose firm is handling the cases. "They are not doing their job."

Though Broward County commissioners acknowledged the 50-year-old building's troubles and agreed two years ago to build a new \$328 million courthouse and parking complex, the lawsuits continue to mount. Campbell said he's still talking to potential clients who fell ill and blame the building. He's seeking damages, but also wants Broward forced to medically monitor his clients for future illnesses, a request he said could cost the county "millions of dollars," depending on how many people sue.

Thousands in Broward County enter the courthouse each day, for jury duty or any number of legal missions.

Lawsuits had been threatened when the legal community clamored for a new courthouse, a crusade that started more than five years ago. But Campbell said those threats weren't a political stunt.

"I was a politician for 10 years. I know what politics is all about," Campbell said. "This case is about peoples' health."

The county is under pressure to move ahead with construction to replace the decaying building, which continues to spring leaks. As delays in hiring a construction company continue, the county is responsible for maintaining the building and dealing with its occasional leaks and floods.

In court documents, the county denies the presence of floating asbestos fibers and toxic mold, and argues that the state's sovereign immunity law protects government from hefty damages. The county also rejects the idea that it was negligent in failing to test for the threats and not warning employees properly.

In the lawsuits, which are the same in content except for employee names, the woes are traced to water intrusion from the 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, and the cleanup.

County officials say the building remains a safe place to work.

"It'll be safe for three or four years," county official Pete Corwin assured on Tuesday, referring to the projected time to replace it.

Mold or flooding problems are dealt with as they come up, he said.

And they continue to come up.

The ninth floor — site of the courtroom for Circuit Judge Cheryl Aleman, who died a year ago of an aggressive form of lung cancer — was stripped to bare concrete, the ceiling tiles ripped out. It reopens soon. Judge Mel Grossman's office was flooded a few months ago and had to be completely redone, for example.

The safety of the building, and the county's poor job maintaining it, were openly discussed at a public hearing two years ago

when commissioners voted for the project, devoting sales tax to it.

"People are afraid to go in there," attorney Howard Pomerantz said at that hearing. "I can't imagine how people who are considering becoming judges in the future feel, putting their health at issue coming in to this building."

"Everybody agrees it's a sick building," County Commissioner Kristin Jacobs said that day, mentioning the cost the county would incur if it didn't build a new one and had to "pay off the lawsuits for a sick building."

"It hasn't been maintained well. I mean, that's no secret," Clerk of Courts Howard Forman said before the commission's "yes" vote.

Meanwhile, the 30-month construction job can't get started.

Broward commissioners delayed a vote earlier this month to hire a construction contractor, as two warring companies fight over the bid.

"This thing was supposed to be started last August," Campbell said. "Every week I hear they're tearing down the parking garage and I still see it up, every time I go by."

Broward's judges aren't part of the lawsuits, Chief Judge Peter Weinstein said Tuesday.

And they all recused themselves from dealing with the case. It's been sent to the courthouse in Miami-Dade County.