

NEWS

Federal courthouse repairs delayed

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Published 7:00 p.m. CT Oct. 20, 2016 | Updated 10:31 p.m. CT Oct. 20, 2016

Efforts to repair Pensacola's mold-ridden federal courthouse are still underway, albeit at a slightly delayed pace.

The courthouse on the corner of Garden and Palafox streets was evacuated in July 2015 amid concerns black mold was adversely affecting the health of the building's occupants. The government's General Services Administration proposed a \$31 million renovation plan to permanently address water intrusion problems in the building, and four committees in the U.S. House and Senate have approved funding for the project.

There is one caveat, however. A House of Representatives appropriations committee stipulated that work on the courthouse is not to begin until the GSA takes ownership of the building in July 2017.

Sen. Nelson: Courthouse stalls are 'balderdash'

The mandate was disheartening for court personnel hoping the renovation could begin immediately after the committee approvals, and Northern District of Florida Chief Judge M. Casey Rodgers said delays only increased the burden on the court and the expenses of litigants.

"Every day is significant for us," Rodgers said.

With the courthouse out of commission, government employees are splitting time between the nearby Winston E. Arnow Federal Building and rented office space downtown. Rodgers said everyone is making do, but that neither location is ideal.

Because of the move, court personnel are doing without five courtrooms, multiple judges' chambers, numerous holding cells and much of its office and storage space. U.S. Marshals have cited there are security risks with judges commuting between buildings, as well as with large volumes of people entering the Arnow building for events like naturalization ceremonies.

Nine online: Federal courthouse is unsafe

"It's a fragile situation, in terms of our operations and our security," Rodgers said.

The Pensacola courthouse is privately owned and leased to the GSA. The terms of the 20-year lease make the GSA responsible for all maintenance and repair of the courthouse. The building has been plagued with problems since its construction in 1997 and opened several months late because of water intrusion issues.

In the 19-years since, there has been a seemingly endless flow of repair projects that never quite got it right.

Rodgers noted she was pleased elected officials like Rep. Jeff Miller, Sen. Bill Nelson and Sen. Marco Rubio helped push the GSA to repair the building once and for all, and is puzzled some legislators balked at moving forward on the repairs because the government doesn't currently own the building.

"The government has had that responsibility since the time they signed the lease," Rodgers said of the repairs.

Once the lease expires, the building will become property of the city of Pensacola, whose officials have pledged to donate the building to the federal government. From there, the work can begin in earnest.

In a written statement, Miller said the key issue is making a permanent fix.

"Since it was evacuated last year, we have made some tremendous strides in the progression of returning the courthouse to a safe public building," Miller's statement said. "The federal government has a responsibility to the taxpayers and to those who

work in and utilize the building to not only fix the courthouse, but to do so in a cost effective and expeditious manner. However, it is of the utmost importance that this fix solves the water intrusions and public health concerns once and for all. That is the critical point in this process.”

A timeline from the GSA estimates that the agency will select an architect to design the courthouse by late November, and the plans should be done by January. Rodgers said her understanding was that the courthouse would be operational again in roughly May 2019.

Until then, "We're going to continue to do our mission as best we can under the constraints we're operating under," Rodgers said.