

'User friendly' courtrooms

New Oakland courts to serve 21st century

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A century ago, county supervisors would put up a square brick building in the center of town and fit a couple of rectangular courtrooms into it.

Not today. And not in Oakland County.

"A circuit court is part of an integrated system," consultant Daniel Smith told an architect's selection committee in Oakland County recently.

The courtroom of the 21st century must provide space for the court staff, protect staff and public from potentially dangerous defendants, be "user friendly" to the people who must go there and even facilitate the work of the media.

That was the consensus of four teams of architects and county officials who are studying what kind of wing to add to the courthouse.

THE ARCHITECT selection panel was most impressed by the presentation of Yamoru Yamasaki Associates of Troy. Smith, of Justice Facilities Planning Inc., is part of the Yamasaki team. County administrators currently are negotiating a contract.

All four bidding architects admit-

ted the Oakland job is a big one and a prestigious one, given Oakland's image of progressive affluence and high population of lawyers and businesses.

There's disagreement over how big the job will be. Some court officials would like a wing big enough to house all 14 present circuit judges and four new ones to be added by 1992.

But County Commissioner Anne Hobart, R-Waterford, who chaired the architect selection panel, said, "The decision has not been made for 18 courtrooms. That's up to the Board of Commissioners. There is a controversy about it."

"We started with six courtrooms (to be added) plus a library and computer area and \$21 million. We will have an outcry from the public if we junk those (existing) marble courtrooms."

BUT CIRCUIT Judge Steven Andrews said the present 25-year-old courthouse tower "ran its gamut 10 years ago."

"We are concerned about weak security in the present courts," Andrews said. Circuit courts, which handle major criminal cases as well as divorces and civil suits, lack the kinds of metal detector set-ups com-

mon in Detroit and federal courtrooms. Court security has been a major concern since the assassination of a California courtroom in the early 1970s.

"Backstage" security is important, too. Sheriff's deputies escorting prisoners want an unobstructed view of a straight corridor, one consultant said.

"The staff is squeezed," Andrews added. "We started with six courtrooms in two floors."

The problem is not only providing courtrooms but close proximity for the Friend of the Court, court records, the probation department and attorney conference space.

"We can't have the probation department across the street or we'll lose 'em (convicted persons) after sentencing," said Joan Young, court administrator.

NEXT BIG consideration for Andrews is a witness-centered courtroom.

In a traditional courtroom, the judge sits above and to the side of a witness, seeing only the back of the witness' head. Andrews insists the judge, the jury and attorneys all have a clear view of the witness. Oakland courts are running two

experiments: allowing news cameras in the courtroom and keeping court records with videotapes rather than stenographers. Andrews wants to avoid showing faces of jurors.

Architect Walter Sobel, of the Blount Engineers Inc. team bidding for the project, scored points when he underlined the needs of judicial dignity. "We'd measure the eye level of the shortest judge on the bench and the tallest attorney. Then we'd make sure the judge is a foot higher," Sobel said.

Sobel also recommended a circular jury table so that no one juror could dominate a jury from the head of a table.

OAKLAND OFFICIALS agree the new courthouse wing should be north of the present courthouse tower at 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac.

A law library is contemplated south of the tower. A third project under consideration is a computer-center building on the west side of Telegraph.

All four architects said county officials should have a full-size mock-up of a new courtroom so that users can thoroughly check it.

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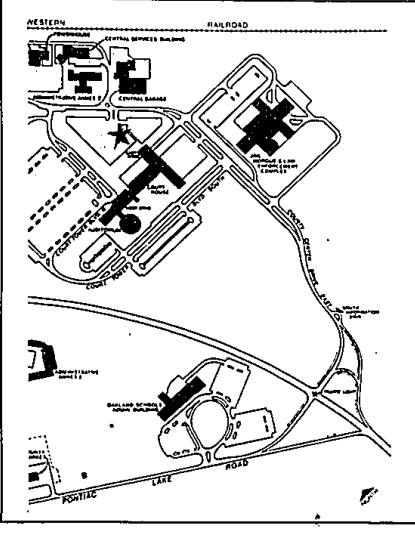
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The star shows where Oakland County officials intend to build a new circuit court wing north of the present courthouse tower in Pontiac. Telegraph Road runs across the center of the map.

Murphy asks homeless aid, transit funds

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Despite its continuing economic boom, Oakland must find money for public transit and the homeless, county executive Daniel T. Murphy said.

Voters in 1988 can expect a ballot issue for more road money, groundbreaking for three new county buildings and the letting of a contract for a trash burning facility, Murphy said in his election year State of the County address.

"In 1985 we made economic development a top priority of Oakland County government in order to diversify our economy and provide jobs for our people," said Murphy, who spent much of his text praising a job growth picture that outpaces the state and nation.

But the Republican executive's 14th message emphasized "caring and concern" for those who haven't shared in the boom.

MURPHY PUT no price tags on any of the construction projects or social programs, but he described some county problems in harsh terms.

"It's my unfortunate duty to report to you that the future of public transit in Oakland County remains bleak," his text said.

"If we are to assure the existence of even a modest bus transportation system, which will serve the elderly, handicapped and transit-dependent of Oakland County, then we must begin to use some of our dollars, as they become available, to build a fund that can be used to get an acceptable system at work in our county."

"It is a tragedy that Pontiac and our south Oakland commuters in particular are denied this most necessary service."

Murphy, like many Oakland leaders, has been critical of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority's orientation of transit service in and out of Detroit rather than in and between suburbs. He has backed an unsuccessful decentralization of SEMTA.

HE RECOMMENDED a "trust fund for the homeless," declining to specify its size until a task force reports to him.

"The causes of homelessness vary. There are those who suffer temporary financial setbacks, those who are subject to domestic upheaval, and some who, because of a physical or mental handicap, cannot sustain themselves," he said.

The trust fund could become "seed money" or "challenge grants" to organizations to treat and prevent homelessness.

Murphy said two cost cutting measures could save the county \$1 million of its \$330 million budget. These are automated subpoena-by-mail service, saving more than \$500,000 of police time in serving subpoenas, and putting several hundred people convicted of non-violent crimes or misdemeanors to work on county projects instead of in jail.

MURPHY BARELY touched on a major money facing Oakland in '88 — new road money.

"I believe that the voters must decide whether or not they wish to pay for a more comprehensive road package," he said, noting that new



Daniel T. Murphy
"caring and concern"
state fees will yield the county road commission only \$3 million to \$14 million.

The three-man road commission wants the county board of commissioners to look at a \$25 vehicle registration fee that would yield \$18 million. The county board would have to put it on the ballot for voters to decide. Murphy made no endorsement.

Sometime this year, Murphy said, the county will begin to negotiate contracts on a long-awaited resource recovery facility — an incinerator that will burn 1,000 tons of trash a day and generate steam.

The facility, to be near the County Service Center in Pontiac, will handle up to 20 percent of all of Oakland's trash in the next five years.

"WE EXPECT to break ground this year on a new library building, a new computer center, an addition to the courthouse and a parking deck for about 300 vehicles (see related story)," Murphy said.

At present, his administration is negotiating with the Yamasaki firm to design the courthouse wing. There is disagreement among county politicians, however, on how big to make the courthouse and whether to award the prized designing contract to one firm or three.

ALTHOUGH PLANT closings will idle 8,000 manufacturing workers in Oakland, Murphy cited a University of Michigan economic prediction that Oakland will gain 45,000 non-manufacturing jobs between 1988 and 1989.

"Our success didn't happen by accident," said Murphy to critics who contend that anyone can run a county attracting so many jobs. "It came about as a result of the commitment made by this administration, the board of commissioners and hundreds of others."

Phase 2 of the Oakland Technology Park in Auburn Hills will see the creation of 10,000 new jobs alone, he said. The tech park is a joint project of the county, business and colleges.

And he noted a county-paid business counselor is helping southern cities in the I-95 corridor prepare for redevelopment when the cross-suburb highway is completed next year.