

Expansion would let court add third judge

By Joanne Malazewski
Staff writer

"If Farmington and Farmington Hills voters say yes to a 20-year \$1.5 million bond proposal the 47th District Court will be expanded by more than 9,000 square feet to accommodate a third judge and additional staff."

"Former jurors are our best ambassadors," said 47th District Court Judge Fred Harris. "They know exactly what the physical plant here is like. They can tell you that this place is like a zoo."

The expansion, which will be on the west side of the existing 13,883-square-foot courthouse on 10 Mile, would add another 9,500 square feet, said architect Bob Allen of John Allen Architects.

The actual addition will be done first," Allen said. The current probation area, magistrate hearing room and employee lounge will be converted to the third courtroom. Employees who work in those areas will be moved to the addition when it is completed.

THE ADDITION would house the probation department, a magistrate hearing room, a jury assembly room, an employee lounge, clerical area and storage. New furnishings would be included. Juries now have to meet in the existing employee lounge or anywhere else where their is room and privacy, Chief District Judge Margaret Schaeffer said.

A third courtroom would be built in the existing courthouse rather than the addition because the area where prisoners are now brought in for trial and held in cellblocks could serve the existing courtrooms and a new courtroom without the need for building new holding cells for prisoners in the addition, Harris said.

"Where prisoner lock-up is what drives this plan," Harris said. The bond money, if approved by voters, also will pay to renovate the existing courtrooms and chambers to match the new area, modify the police holding area to access the two courtrooms and refurbish the exterior of the building.

Bond money also will be used to repair and repave the court parking lot, put in an additional 73 parking spaces by the addition and improve landscaping.

Preliminary plans show using one of (two) existing drives (into the court parking lot), but we will be rearranging the circulation of traf-

fic," Allen said.

With the bond issue would pay for expansion and renovation, it will not pay for additional staff — perhaps seven employees, including a court reporter and court officer — that would accompany the need for a third judge and expanded operations, Schaeffer and Harris said.

BUT THE JUDGES are convinced that employee costs will not be borne by taxpayers. "I can say without reservation there will be no higher taxes because of additional employees," Harris said. "It is fair to assume that because of the volume (of cases), the revenues are going to go up. We don't cost the cities anything."

A judge's current \$93,812 annual salary is paid primarily by the state.

Fate of bond proposal rests in voters' hands

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The proposed expansion and renovation of the courthouse will cost Farmington about \$13,000 annually to pay off the bonds over 20 years. That works out to less than \$2.50 annually for the average Farmington homeowner, said Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman.

Even though the state Legislature already approved a third judge, it was effective only through 1990. A request again has been made to legislators to authorize the third judge.

If approved — expected sometime in late 1991 or early 1992 — candidates would seek election in November 1992 and a new judge would begin in January, 1993.

"The enabling legislation was passed once. I think it's just pro forma this time," District Judge Fred Harris said.

Two judicial seats actually will be open at that time because Schaeffer's term will be up and she cannot seek re-election because of her age.

The judges are seeking expansion and renovation of the courthouse now so an additional courtroom and other offices are ready when — and if

— a new judge begins in 1993.

Even if voters don't approve the bond proposal in November, Schaeffer and Harris said a third judge is needed.

ACCORDING TO court records, the 47th District Court caseload jumped from 32,599 in 1983 to 37,440 in 1990. Three part-time magistrates currently help the two judges handle the overflow but they are not allowed to try cases or hold preliminary exams in criminal matters.

The 47th District Court is the 14th busiest court in the state based on case filings per judge. The state average is 12,082 case filings per judge. In 1990, the 47th District Court had 17,130 filings per judge. Consider that the Walled Lake District Court has a request in for a fourth judge and their average per-judge case filings is 18,900, Harris said.

"Even with a third judge, we will exceed the average," he added.

Also consider, Harris said, that according to the 1990 census, Farmington and Farmington Hills has a combined population of about 88,000 people. Pontiac's population dropped to 71,900 and that district court has four judges. Three dis-

trict judges cover Livingston County and that court has a smaller caseload than the Farmington court, he added.

In Oakland County, only the Clarkston and Rochester district courts rank above Farmington in the filings per judge, Schaeffer said.

But the judges say it's not just the cases they must individually address, but other programs, such as the Community Work Program, which sends some people convicted of misdemeanors and ordinance violations to work in the community, such as cleaning up roadways.

In the four years of the program, the number of participants grew from 450 to 2,000. In the first six months of 1991, that program has exceeded in terms of manpower what was accomplished in all of 1990, Harris said.

"We need room to function," Schaeffer said.

There's also a proposal to increase the jurisdiction of small claims from the current \$1,500 to \$2,500. That proposal alone will again increase business at the court, Schaeffer said.

"The question comes down simply to growth. The communities have grown. The demand for services has increased," Harris said.

'I can say without reservation there will be no higher taxes because of additional employees.'

— Judge Fred Harris
47th District Court

The judges get \$52,770 of their salary directly from the state and \$41,042 through the cities. The cities are reimbursed \$35,938 of their portion.

The judges are working to organize a citizens committee to campaign for the \$1.8 million bond proposal. "We welcome input," Schaeffer said.

Anyone interested in serving on the committee may call the judges at 477-5630.

Arrests credited to tough policy toward drug users

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While many well-publicized drug enforcement programs zero in on drug sellers, the accountability program targets drug users "who should and will be held accountable for using drugs," Dwyer said.

Before the program, when police found someone with drugs, a ticket was issued and the drugs were confiscated.

NOW PEOPLE — even with the minutest amount of drugs — are tak-

en to the police station, fingerprinted, photographed and their car is seized, Dwyer said.

Foreclosure proceedings, allowed under state and federal law, are initiated when people are arrested for possessing any type of illegal drug, other than marijuana.

If convicted, users serve sentences in Oakland County Jail or are forced to attend rehabilitation programs. The users pay for the program.

In addition to the 375 arrests, police have impounded 178 vehicles

and initiated 34 forfeiture proceedings.

Since the program's beginnings, \$26,771 cash, 10 vehicles, two cellular phones, 12 beeper pagers, and eight watches have been subject to forfeiture.

Through the program, police also have seized drugs and paraphernalia such as 99 Xanax pills, 15 grams heroin, 388 roaches (buds of marijuana cigarettes), 192 baggies of marijuana, 31 rocks of crack cocaine, four bottles of methadone and 25 syringes.

Crowded buses start students' day

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"They said it was to save money — but they made the bus routes longer and our buses are packed." Concerns have been raised in recent weeks over \$1 million in cuts

from Farmington Public Schools' transportation budget, which officials said are necessary because of lost state funding and the failed millage attempt last February to replace that money.

Secondary students are now

picked up on main roads and service has also been cut back for elementary students and those attending parochial schools.

With fewer buses running, students say, three students now ride in a seat.

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