Assistant Public Works Director Fred Rainford looks out a second-story window in the Old Courthouse, which will house the City Court judges when renovations are complete.

Another $1 million OK'd for Old Courthouse

By FRANK MAIN

The Metro Council voted Wednesday to sink another $1 million into the renovation of the Old Courthouse to complete the over-budget, overdue project.

The venerable building is being renovated to house the City Court. The five City Court judges and their staff are expected to move from their shabby quarters on Laurel Street into the Old Courthouse across from the Capitol by Christmas.

"I'm sure the judges and the administration will be happy when it's done," said Assistant Public Works Director Fred Rainford. "It will be a first-class facility. It will be unique in the Southern region."

Originally, the renovation project was estimated to cost about $6 million.

But costs for the building already exceed $6.2 million. With the extra $1 million the council approved Wednesday -- $500,000 for a furniture package and $500,000 to complete the fourth floor -- the project is far over-budget.

A tour of the facility Wednesday revealed grandiose courtrooms, oak-paneled judges' chambers and an elaborate security system.

One sheriff's employee who once worked on the second floor of the Old Courthouse marveled at the building's atrium.

"It's just like a palace," she said.

Despite the breathtaking workmanship of the renovations, the Old Courthouse project has been plagued with problems from the beginning.

Former Mayor Pat Sneed hired architect Pete Clements to design the project in 1987. The next year, just before leaving office, Sneed signed a contract with Willis B. Simmons and Toomer Construction for a $4.6 million basic renovation contract for the basement and the first three floors of the building.

Demolition work began the next year at the same time Willis B. Simmons was trying to start construction, leading to delays in the project, Rainford said.

Also, the sheriff's office, the downtown jail, police headquarters and the city's community development office were moving from the Old Courthouse during the construction, compounding the problem, Rainford said. And asbestos was found in the building, with the removal of the hazardous material further delaying the renovation, he said.

Willis B. Simmons was given 450 days to complete the project. Several years later, the Department of Public Works still hasn't formally accepted the work.

Rainford said the company is demanding $1 million in delay charges from the city because of the construction holdups.

Although he admitted there were several factors that contributed to the contractor's delays, Rainford said the contractor doesn't deserve $1 million.

The city, meanwhile, could assess damages against the contractor for finishing the project late, he said.

Currently, the city is finishing the design of the fourth floor of the Old Courthouse and will soon take bids to complete the renovation project, which could take until the end of the year, Rainford said.

About half of the $1 million the council approved Wednesday is budgeted for the "furniture package", including furniture, signs and the remaining security equipment, said City Court Administrator Mickey Skrying.

Said Skrying, the city has spent the original $1 million court budget for furniture, signs and the remaining security equipment. The court now has allocated $1 million to complete the renovation.

The court has already spent $1 million, and the $1.2 million furniture package that included such big-ticket items as a $3,000 couch and a $5,000 table.

Any surplus in the court's judicial expense fund -- the money generated from civil-filing fees -- will pay off the

CONTINUED FROM 1A

Willis B. Simmons was trying to start construction, leading to delays in the project, said Chief Administrative Officer Graydon Walker.

Walker said he hopes the debt is paid off in 10 years.

Skeling said there hasn't been a surplus in the judicial expense fund for two years, but Walker said he expects the city to do a better job collecting civil fees.

The judges will move into a top-flight facility when the renovation is completed.

There are 13 holding cells in the basement, monitored by a state-of-the-art security system including television cameras, infrared sensors and electronic key cards. The security system is more elaborate than the district court's across the street where some of the more serious felony suspects are held.

The renovated courthouse also includes a large arrangement court on the first floor and three other courtrooms on the third floor for DWI, civil and traffic cases.

There is a 10-foot security wall around the parking lot in the back of the courthouse.

Skeling said the courthouse's security system meets the requirements of the U.S. Marshal's Office. The district court -- and even the federal court -- can use the courtrooms for special cases that require high-security.

"It will be a beautiful place," Walker said. "It's needed for the parish."