Ascension confronts courthouse overcrowding

Lack of space adds an element of danger

By JOHN McMILLAN
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GONZALES — The rapidly growing east bank of Ascension Parish boasts a vibrant and expanding economy. “We’re growing at warp speed,” Ascension Parish Sheriff Jeff Wiley said.

But growth may spawn problems. “We are getting beat to death with growing pains,” said Parish President Tommy Martinez.

Evidence of this shows up in an “acutely critical” lack of space to house governmental functions.

Compounding the problem is the fact that the parish seat, Donaldsonville, is on the west bank of the Mississippi River, where one-fifth of the population lives and where growth is basically static.

In some cases, courthouse overcrowding makes serving the public’s needs uncomfortable and unwieldy. In others, there is an added element of danger.

“There is no place to hold prisoners,” said District Judge Ralph Tureau. “Judges use the same bathroom as prisoners. Anybody can walk into the courtroom and be in the midst of prisoners mingling with victims, jurors, witnesses.”

“We need two things,” Tureau said, “sufficient courtroom facilities and security. We have neither.”

The present Ascension Parish Courthouse East has one courtroom for five judges. Sheriff Jeff Wiley says it was too small the day the ribbon was cut in 1976.

Some governmental officials say this proposed $6 million three-story addition to Ascension Parish Courthouse East is only a ‘Band-Aid’ solution to security and space problems facing the parish.
Those clamoring for new facilities are not limited to judges. Every official who uses the courthouse setup seeks relief. There are plans in the works to expand the overcrowded and inadequate Ascension Parish Courthouse East in Gonzales. But some officials consider this approach simply a $6 million aspirin to stop the headaches.

Instead of a temporary fix, they would like to see a major governmental complex built somewhere on the burgeoning east bank, where 80 percent or more of the population resides.

Nevertheless, an admitted short-lived solution is better than nothing. Officials shoehorned into cramped quarters reluctantly admit.

Judges, the sheriff and other public officials assert that the courthouse situation presents serious problems.

"It's a tragedy waiting to happen," said Tureau, chief judge of the 23rd Judicial District Court. 

"There is absolutely no security, zero," said Tureau.

While government officials were planning for a new complex, solutions to the means of solving the problems at Ascension Courthouse East, they suddenly were presented with an unexpected, unwanted, but dramatic example illustrating the need.

A small, wiry man accused of six murders in the River Parishes told corrections officers before a pre-trial hearing he had to use a toilet for a brief taste of freedom.

Donaldsonville.

"We don't have a jury deliberation room," Tureau said. "We put them in the coffee room and some of the jurors have to stand up while they deliberate. People have to go through prisoners to get to the bathroom.

"The courthouse in Donaldsonville - besides people hating to drive there (from the populous east bank) - is inadequate," Tureau said.

"The fire marshal wouldn't approve it, and it doesn't meet the Americans With Disabilities Act," he added.

District Judge John L. Peytavin, who presides over Blank's case, said a new courthouse "is especially needed in relation to jury trials.

"We don't have any place for jurors to go. Victims' relatives are rubbing shoulders with defendants' relatives. The problem comes to the forefront during criminal trials," Peytavin said.

There's no doubt we are in dire need for security reasons and to handle cases expeditiously," said District Judge Alvin Turner. "We need to hold court in a place where people can be comfortable.

"Now, we have jurors mixed in with prisoners. There are no holding facilities and no place for witnesses, who then must use the jury pool by mixing with them," Turner said.

The biggest problem is in Gonzales, said Parish Judge Marilyn Lambert. "The most people are on the east bank, but we try to schedule court on the east and on the west side.

"We have so many cases on the east side and only one courtroom. On days I have trials in Gonzales, the volume is tremendous," Lambert said.

"People are lining the walls two and three deep and they pull out into the hall and on the steps. There is no security. And it's only going to get worse if something isn't done," Lambert said.

The lack of courtroom facilities is only one problem, say others who are housed in the present buildings. "I can say in Louisiana, or maybe the entire South, I'm the only sheriff who has a T-building," Wiley said. "I was lucky to get it for my juvenile section and the DA program.

"The situation is acutely critical," the sheriff said. "I have four people in a (21-foot) warrant office. The Patrol Division has no place for the public to talk to an officer. There's no interrogation room.

"I'm holding on to bringing 40, 50 or 60 inmates in here at one time and free people and inmates are shoulder-to-shoulder. My employees are suffering. They are willing to work but just tired, they are ready to quit," he added.

"In 1976, we cut the ribbon (on the Gonzales courthouse) and the day we cut it, it was too small. We had to renovate almost immediately," Wiley said.

The cry for new facilities does not stop with judges and the sheriff. "The fact that Donaldsonville is what it is," said Parish Assessor Gerald McCary.

The lack of courtroom facilities is not the only problem, say others who are housed in the present buildings. "I have all the records of our files in Donaldsonville and we have to pull all the records out of our part of the government," said Tureau.

"We have 800-square feet in Gonzales. If you get more than three or four customers in here, we can't handle it.

"We have no storage space in Gonzales," the clerk of court said. "If a judge holds court in Gonzales, we have to pull all the records out of our files in Donaldsonville and bring them over for four or five days. The judge to see and then take them back to Donaldsonville.

"Bourque has taken the space problem in hand on two previous occasions and currently is doing it again.

In 1975 I was completely out of space in Donaldsonville," he said. "We have to renovate and remodel, we're just about filled up. This year, we have added another 2,000 square feet and we're gathering on to put a million dollars.

"In Gonzales, I'm adding on 2,000 square feet (to the existing courtroom building)," the sheriff said. "We have to pull 40, 50 or 60 records in here at one time and free people and inmates are shoulder-to-shoulder. My employees are suffering. They are willing to work but just tired, they are ready to quit," he added.

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