

St. George says Pioneer Courthouse occupants can stay put

Written by David Louis October 4, 2020

ST. GEORGE — Although agreements between the city and the organizations that occupy the Pioneer Courthouse in downtown St. George have likely lapsed, the city is not looking to pass around evictions — much to the relief of the tenants.

For at least the next five years — or until unforeseen circumstances change city officials' minds — the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Sons of Utah Pioneers Dixie Encampment Chapter, Washington County Historical Society and Arts to Zion can occupy their spaces in the Pioneer Courthouse.

Although no agenda item has yet come before the City Council, Mayor Jon Pike said there are no plans to move anyone from the courthouse.

"They are doing a great job as caretakers of the building and we would like to see that continue," Pike said.

The courthouse is St. George's oldest standing building.

When construction began in 1866, St. George was an ideal location because the city had been designated as the seat of Washington County on Jan. 14, 1863. It took nearly 10 years to complete construction because the same workforce was also building the St. George Tabernacle as well as the Temple.

When completed, the first floor of the courthouse served as offices for the county government. The large room on the second floor was used as both a courtroom and a schoolroom. It was also used for public meetings, plays, dances and a multitude of other activities. The basement held three jail cells.

Features of the building include 18-inch thick walls that can be seen at windows and doorways, austere chandeliers, original paintings of Zion National Park and the Grand Canyon by Loren Isaac Covington, a large security vault with its back extending out beyond the exterior wall, extensive cornice work and a cupola which was designed for hanging those convicted of appropriate crimes.

Although Western justice often handed out swift sentences, no hangings were ever performed at the courthouse.

The building was used continuously as a courthouse until 1960. Washington County sought to tear it down in 1970 when the city of St. George came to its rescue and became the owner and caregiver of the building.

It was put on the National Register of Historic Places on Sept. 22, 1970.



Las Vegas resident Kathy Brown (circled) gets the guided tour of the St. George Pioneer Courthouse from Jeanine Vander Bruggen, courthouse manager and curator. St. George, Utah, Sept. 26, 2020. Photo by David Louis, St. George News.

The building sat empty until a major renovation project was completed in 1986 when the St. George Area Chamber of Commerce occupied the courthouse for the next 31 years. After the chamber relocated in 2017, the Dixie/Arizona Strip Interpretive Association opened for a short period followed by another vacancy of 18 months.

The fact that the building is still usable is a testament of the skill and care used in its construction even though, unlike later buildings that used lava stone for foundations, sandstone bricks were used for both the foundation and upper walls.

It was discovered that sandstone used underground in this area tends to erode. Evidence of this can be seen in the basement jail cells.

The courthouse was re-opened in December 2019 through a collaborative effort between the organizations that now occupy the space and the City of St. George.

Through a mutual agreement with the city, the occupants last year were given the green light to set up shop in the courthouse.

St. George City Attorney Shawn Guzman said that any agreements that had been crafted and agreed to by the council in the past have "most likely" lapsed.

"We will look at new agreements that will give maximum flexibility for the city to do what we need to do with the building as time passes," Guzman added.



Stacy displays line the hallways and rooms of the historic St. George Pioneer Courthouse. St. George, Utah, Sept. 26, 2020 | Photo by David Louis, St. George News.

Although no official cost estimates have been submitted, the revenue needed will be substantial to fix aging infrastructure such as the building's electrical system and foundation, city officials said.

For now, the organizations that occupy the courthouse will be allowed to stay where they are. This is good news to Jeanine Vander Bruggen, courthouse manager, curator and chief-bottle-washer.

"Everyone there wants to show off the building and show off their organizations ... and we all want to have a sense of permanence to be able to make plans for the future," Vander Bruggen said.

Along with showcasing the organization's impact on Southern Utah, visitors come face-to-face with displays featuring the history of St. George.

"I really want to know what the city's plans are long term for using the building," Vander Bruggen said. "If we get the chance to stay I would want to create a non-profit organization to support courthouse operation ... and elevate some of the financial burdens on the city."

The future vision, Vander Bruggen added, is to have the building remain open to the public, continue to host lectures and events and add to the historical collection.

"We see the courthouse as a focal point of historic information. In fact, we are already a great place to find that kind of information," Vander Bruggen said. "We also want to involve as many organizations as we can to help achieve and expand on that goal."



This is a small part of the permanent collection of the Pioneer Courthouse. The Pioneer Courthouse was used in the St. George Temple for many years. The photo was taken during the renovation project in downtown St. George, Utah, Sept. 26, 2020. Photo by David Louis, St. George News.

It is buildings like this, Vander Bruggen said, that are signposts of what the early settlers had to endure to "create such a wonderful community" in Southern Utah.

"If you think about all of the sacrifices that people went through to create something useful and something that we can now enjoy is a reminder of what it took to build St. George," she added. "If we lose that we lose the sense of purpose that building created."

There is no greater honor, she added, to celebrate such a "positive history" that is the Pioneer Courthouse.

The courthouse is currently open Friday, Saturday and Monday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. For more information, call (435) 632-1215.

The Washington County Historical Society contributed to this article.

This article contains quotes from Jeanine Vander Bruggen who is an Executive Board member of the Washington County Historical Society and a contributor to this article. She is also a member of the Color Country Chapter in St George, Utah.

Washington County Historical Society maintains the historical exhibits at the Pioneer Courthouse and provides weekend tours to visitors.