

Interview of Washington County Commissioner Dean Cox at the County Administration Building on Monday, Jan. 25, 2021 concerning construction of the old County Administration Building, construction of the new County Administration Building, the former Hall of Justice Building, the Purgatory Correctional Facility and the Fifth District Court building.

Commissioner Cox said the Washington County Administration Building at 197 East Tabernacle was completed in 1966 after a three-year construction process. It replaces a home where Paul Cottam once lived.

The County Administration Building replaced the Pioneer Courthouse at 97 East St. George Boulevard, which served the community from 1870 to the early 1960s.

The plaque on the upper floor of the 28,358-square-foot County Administration Building states it was constructed under the auspices of County Commissioners M. Truman Bowler and Evan J. Woodbury. The architect was John S. Rowley and the contractors were the Carter Brothers.

Other county officials listed on the plaque were: Members Ivin E. Barlow, Wayne Wilson, Floyd G. Ence and Clerk Merrill Stucki.

Cox said the unique thing about the building is that it was constructed as a bomb and/or fallout shelter during the Cold War period between the United States and the former Soviet Union which prompted the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

That is why the concrete-constructed building had storage water tanks in addition to an emergency back-up power generator. Cox said some federal monies were available to help pay for the building and he noted the county building was built to protect against an electromagnetic pulse, which can immobilize cars and computers.

The building was constructed in such a way that it could separate all of the antennas on the roof so any electromagnetic pulse would not be carried down to the computers and two-way radios in the building.

A room in the basement of the building is copper plated to protect against an electromagnetic pulse from an above ground nuclear explosion.

During its years of operation, the County Administration Building has been used variously by the State Driver's License Division, the State Department of Motor Vehicles, State Juvenile Detention, Sen. Orrin Hatch's St. George office, Utah State University Extension Service, County Public Works, County Sheriff's Office, and County Emergency Management.

Other agencies housed in the building have included the State Department of Agriculture and offices for beekeepers.

The building also once housed a judge's chambers when the county ran the court system until 1986 when the state took over the court system. Cox remembers one year when he was a student taking a business law class, his class came to the County Administration Building to watch a rape trial.

Meanwhile, construction began in early January 2021 on a new 141,000 square foot, 4-story county building (that also includes a basement) where the old Zions Bank building once stood on the southwest corner of 100 East and Tabernacle, just west of the existing County Administration Building.

The new County Administration Building will be designed as a one-stop shopping facility for county residents to deal with a projected county population of 500,000 by 2060.

"We will try to consolidate as much (of county services) as we can," Cox said. One thing the county is working to solve is having enough parking stalls. One alternative would be to cooperate with the City of St. George for a shared parking facility.

Currently, the Planning and Zoning Department, Building Inspector, Emergency Management Office, and the Graphic Information Systems are housed in the basement of the existing County Administration Building while the County Treasurer, County Auditor, County Clerk and County Commission share the upstairs.

Simpson Coulter Studio of Las Vegas, Nev., are the architects on the new building and Watts Construction of St. George, Utah, is the contractor on the \$25 million to \$26 million building project.

"We are not borrowing a nickel for it," Cox said. "It used to be even just 10 years ago, you would give your departments their budget and they would keep a contingency (fund). Then they (department heads) all felt there was a need to spend it at the end of the year because they might lose it."

But county officials told the county departments whatever they didn't need, to put it back into the contingency fund and whatever needs they had for the beginning of the new year, the county would pay for it.

"We went from 28 contingency funds to one contingency fund," Cox said. "We have averaged about a million dollars a year (in contingency funds). As a result, we don't have to do a revenue bond or a general obligation bond" on the new county facility.

Nearly every county department will be housed in the new building with the exception of the Justice Court (which will remain in the existing County Assessor/Recorder Building, and the Sheriffs office, which will still be at the Purgatory Correctional Facility.

The county bought the former Boulevard Furnishings Building (constructed in 1966) in 1982 for \$1.2 million. It is currently used by the County Assessor, County Recorder, Justice Court, and County Information Technology offices. The interior of the building was renovated in 2001-2002. Then the exterior of the 47,326-square-foot, 3-story building was renovated in December 2019.

The Hall of Justice building was constructed in 1977 and it was supposed to last 50 years. However, the county was sued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1995 or 1996 because the county didn't have a proper place to separate prisoners.

In 1998, the county moved the jail and sheriff facilities to the Purgatory Correctional Facility in Hurricane, which has a capacity of 400 prisoners compared to 75 prisoners at the Hall of Justice building on 200 North and 200 East in St. George.

During its tenure as the Hall of Justice building, the building housed the County Sheriff's office, the County Dispatch office, the Courthouse, and the County Jail. Cox remembers a County Sheriff's deputy accidentally fired a bullet that eventually lodged in the Sheriff's desk in the Hall of Justice building. Luckily, no one was injured.

The county currently leases excess prison capacity to the state at the Purgatory Correctional Facility. In return, the county has used the state payments for the county's housing state prisoners to help pay off the construction bond on the Purgatory Correctional Facility.

The Purgatory Correctional Facility in Hurricane currently houses the County Jail, County Sheriff, the Utah Highway Patrol and Utah Probation and Parole offices. At the Fifth District Court and Juvenile Court building at 205 West Tabernacle, the State Legislature determined the county would be responsible for providing court bailiffs and for transporting prisoners to and from the County Purgatory Correctional Facility. The Fifth District Court building was constructed about 2005-2006. To reduce travel time from its existing Washington County Attorney's office on 200 North and 200 East, the County bought Vernon Worthen's old home along with two other homes on 100 West and Tabernacle, and built a Washington County Attorney's building to be right next to the Fifth District Court building.

Loren Webb, WCHS interviewer