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Lawyers, judges weigh in on courthouse debate

Opinions about demolition abound in legal circles in Seneca and Lucas counties, elsewhere

BLADE STAFF

TIFFIN - Seneca County's judges have not been willing to take a stand on the fate of their county's historic 1884 courthouse, but judges outside the county have raised their voices to defend the country's "temples of justice."

Judge Terry Ruckriegle, who is the chairman of the National Conference of State Trial Judges, a branch of the judicial division of the American Bar Association, told The Blade last week that saving old courthouses should be a priority.

"It is very important that these buildings are maintained, even if these buildings are restored and preserved to be used for other government offices," said the presiding judge of the 5th Judicial District in Breckenridge, Colo.

"I believe that these buildings actually are the symbols of the justice system where people come to believe that they are in a place where they will be heard," Judge Ruckriegle said.



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"These buildings hold a special place in the hearts of those who work in the justice system."

Judge James Jensen of Lucas County Common Pleas knows

personally the importance of historic courthouses. Practicing law in Toledo since 1970 and a local judge since 1995, Judge Jensen gives tours of his courthouse, especially to jurors, to show them the importance of their service.

"By their mere presence, [courthouses] speak volumes about our legal system and what it stands for," Judge Jensen said. "I do think they are temples of justice."

The debate over courthouse demolition-versus-restoration is a hot topic among Seneca County's lawyers, with some calling for restoration and some hoping for a modern building in which to practice their profession.



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Other lawyers are indifferent, saying the taxpayers should decide what happens to the courthouse.

"We are always talking about it," said Kent Nord, a lawyer who works in Tiffin. "Clients who come into the annex behind the courthouse talk about it too."

Mr. Nord, who believes the building should be demolished, said most of the local lawyers with whom he has conferred agree a new courthouse should be built.

"In my mind, there is no way the current courthouse can be refurbished to meet the needs of our judicial system today," Mr. Nord said.

When John Curtin began practicing law in Tiffin in 2001, he wrote a letter to Tiffin's Advertiser-Tribune newspaper stating his opinion that the courthouse should be preserved. Six years later, the lawyer who once practiced in Toledo still believes the old courthouse should be refurbished.

"I grew up in Maumee and we've got some old buildings, but it is not like what you have in Tiffin," Mr. Curtin said. "I could see the possibilities in it. It is just the style of it. It's late 19th century - I thought it would be a shame to put something new there."

Longtime Tiffin attorney Michael Lange, who is semiretired, sat on a 2000 committee that studied the future of the courthouse and ultimately recommended that the county commissioners renovate it.

A 1/4 percent sales tax was put on the ballot in 2002 to help pay for renovation, but it was defeated by a few hundred votes.

Mr. Lange said he was the sole member of the 12-person committee who did not think renovation made sense because of the cost. He still doesn't.

"It's not your money," Mr. Lange said. "We're dealing with other people's money. If you feel restoration is the best expenditure, fine; and if you feel you need to replace it with something newer and more modern, that's fine too," he said, adding that the debate has given everyone something to talk about.

"I have coffee every morning with four or five guys, and it's a nice thing to chat about," Mr. Lange said.

Mr. Lange's daughter, Anne Lange, who practices law in Tiffin, figures she's one of the few county residents without a strong opinion on the issue.

"It would be a lot of money [to renovate], but I think if it's possible to find the money and if the preservationists feel so strongly, I think they should be given the opportunity to locate the money and restore it, but if not I think the commissioners have every right to bring this issue to a close," she said.

Judge Jensen said historic courthouses should be saved.

"Every effort should be made to preserve our heritage," the judge said. "My hope would be that every effort would be made to examine ways of saving these structures."

Blade staff writers Steve Eder and Jennifer Feehan contributed to this report.

- Dave Murray



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