

# THE FOOTHILLS SUN-GAZETTE

## Supervisors seek proposals to purchase and lease Visalia's Historic Courthouse Square

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By Reggie Ellis

Visalia - A once prominent landmark in Visalia's downtown has become a target for vandalism since it was abandoned nearly a decade ago. At least one Visalia councilman wants to buy it and renovate it. Residents want to know why it's vacant. And the community wants to see its history and architecture preserved for future generations. And for the first time, the County of Tulare wants to do something about it.

At its Aug. 22 meeting, the Tulare County Board of Supervisors authorized staff to seek proposals to renovate and reuse the former County Courthouse building at 210 N. Court St. in Visalia.

Deputy CAO John Hess explained that the intent of the agenda item was to solicit proposals for the restoration and reuse of the four-story building that once served as the County Courthouse.



"The purpose of this RFP is to maximize the use of a vacant County asset, preserve an important part of the County's history, and generate economic stimulus in downtown Visalia," Hess said.

The property includes two parcels at the corner of Oak Avenue and Court Street. The first parcel is 69,000 square feet and includes the four-story former courthouse, annex building and a parking lot. The second parcel, located across Oak Avenue to the north, is a 16,300 square foot parking lot also owned by the County.

The four-story building was constructed in 1935 as an expansion of the original County Courthouse built in the 1880s. The 22,300 square foot modern structure was designed by Ernest J. Kump and constructed by Frank J. Reilly and is considered a gem of the Public Works Act with its "Art Deco façade and monument-like presence." The building housed the County Board of Supervisors, Treasury, Auditor, Assessor and Purchasing departments until 1952 when it became the acting Courthouse after the original was damaged by an earthquake with an epicenter in Tehachapi. When the current Courthouse was constructed in 1958, the building was used for a variety of purposes but has been vacant since 2008.

Hess said the four-story building is an "exceptional" registered historic landmark but may require "considerable investment" to bring it up to current standards. The building's main entrance and mezzanine-level restrooms do meet current ADA requirements, it contains hazardous materials such as lead-based paint and asbestos and may need structural renovation as it was built with poured-in-place concrete. He said developers interested in purchasing the property would get the building as-is and it would be the responsibility of the developer to make any improvements to bring the structure into compliance with current California building codes.

"I think it should be a sale," said Supervisor Amy Shuklian, who represents District 3 where the building is located. "I don't think someone put \$1 million into it to lease the property."

Supervisor Kuyler Crocker agreed saying that the County did not want to enter into the property management business.

"We are not in the game to make profit after profit after profit," Crocker said. "We are here to provide vital services that the private sector is unable to do."

The adjoining annex to the east was built in 1974 to accommodate a growing Social Services Department. The 12,000 square foot annex was renovated in 2011 and currently houses the County's Probation Department. Supervisor Crocker asked what would happen to the Probation Department if the County were to sell the annex as well. Hess said any proceeds from the sale would be deposited into the County's future construction fund which could be used to renovate an existing building or construct a new building to house the Probation Department.

Chief Probation Officer Michelle Bonwell said parking is already an issue between the two lots and said it would be "very difficult" to operate in the building if the parking lots were sold. She said she was in favor of the County selling the entire property as long as there was room to house the entire Probation Department in a single location elsewhere.

"I hope we are not dispersed throughout the County," Chief Bonwell said.

Hess outlined guidelines for the RFP process. Requirements included demonstrating long-term financial sustainability on the company and the development project, preserving the historic value and legacy of the structure, and past accomplishments in downtown with historic renovation projects. While not a requirement, Hess said the RFP also encourages developers to come up with a plan for the entire parcel and not just the four-story building.

Prior to the vote, Chairman Pete Vander Poel wanted to make it clear that the building would not be demolished.

"The proposals are at our discretion to reserve the right to retain any buildings and utility access," Hess said.

The 4-0 vote for the sweeping motion included: a declaration of intent to sell or lease the property and authorize its publication, approve request for proposals for the development of the property, set 9 a.m. on Oct. 3 as the date and time when sealed proposals will be considered by the selection committee, authorize the CAO to send a letter to the City of Visalia notifying of the intent, approve an agreement with Self-Help Enterprises for consulting services. The vote also created an selection committee that will include Chairman Vander Poel and District 3 Supervisor Shuklian as well as Mario Cifuentez, deputy city manager for the City of Visalia who was in attendance at the meeting.

Developer proposals must be received by 5 p.m. on Oct. 2. The committee will then have a week to review the proposals before interviewing the most qualified. Proposals will be presented to the Board of Supervisors on Halloween followed by negotiations and a possible approval by the Supervisors on Dec. 19.