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Chair and Wakefield Supervisor Debbie Donehey



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Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Van Carney



IS TIDE TURNING TOWARD RESTORING HISTORIC COURTHOUSE?

BY JULIA SHANAHAN
Rappahannock News staff

County officials for more than a year have been discussing the building of a new courthouse in the Town of Washington but now some members of the Board of Supervisors are questioning the need for a new structure rather than restoring the existing historic courthouse.

“I don’t think the board is together,” said Chair and Wakefield Supervisor Debbie Donehey. “I don’t believe there’s a unanimous vote on building a new courthouse.”

Yet, the supervisors in May 2022 unanimously voted to direct the county Buildings Committee to explore options for constructing a new courthouse in the town

Some county officials questioning need for a new one



Left: The latest rendering of a proposed new courthouse presented in May.

Below: The current courthouse dates to 1833; surrounding buildings were added later.

WILEY WILSON VIA RAPPAHANNOCK COUNTY GOVERNMENT (LEFT); LUKE CHRISTOPHER (BELOW)



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rather than renovating the current one. Since then, residents have been critical of proposed architectural designs, skeptical about the need to construct a building five times larger than the historic courthouse on Gay Street and concerned about the costs to do so.

Donehey said she intends to propose that the county conduct a study on the existing courthouse in order to determine what the price range would be for renovation and restoration, and said she's "leaning in that direction." Before making a final decision, Donehey said she wants more specific information about what that project would entail.

"I would like to look at it from a 'joining the buildings together' analysis versus just deciding that we're going to go forward with a brand new building that, from what I've seen anyway, doesn't look like it fits in very well," Donehey said.

Hampton Supervisor Keir Whitson said in a Rappahannock News story last week: "Let me state at the outset, based on what I've heard from many of my constituents, I really have little interest in a new courthouse building. I may be alone among my board colleagues on this, but I think we need to take a hard look at working with the facilities we have."

Whitson said the Buildings Committee has been a useful "think tank" and has done the "hard work of looking at these space assessment studies and the condition of our buildings. But ultimately, it's going to be the decision of the members of the Board of Supervisors to decide what direction we're going to go."

Buildings Committee members recommended that the county build a new structure and have only estimated a price range for adding an addition to the existing building — \$6.8

million. The committee also reported that it would need to build another structure on the courthouse grounds in order to accommodate the county's space needs, which could cost an additional \$4.8 million. The Buildings Committee estimated that a new courthouse structure could cost anywhere between \$9 million and \$12 million.

Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Van Carney declined to take a clear position on what he would like to see done with the courthouse and said it's still early in the process and there are alternative options still to be considered.

He doesn't want to see a large addition added to the back of the historic courthouse, saying, "it silences the original elegance of that building." He said the body could consider options like "connecting buildings with newer buildings" on the courthouse grounds.

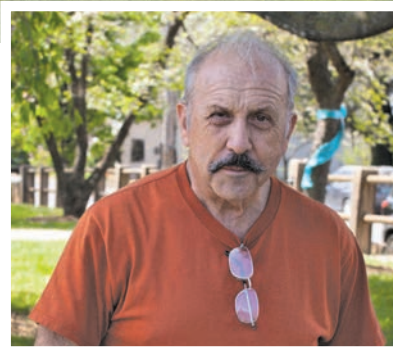
"My guiding light here is not to build," Carney said. "My guiding light is to provide the space that we need for our court functions and for our constitutional officers."

The Buildings Committee has been meeting for more than a year to discuss plans to restore county-owned buildings in the Town of Washington that have fallen in disrepair. County officials have acknowledged that the deteriorating buildings have gone unaddressed for the last decade, and recent conversations have "meandered" without a specialist at the helm to lead the project.

The committee last month advertised for an architecture and engineering specialist and it's sorting through applicants.

Why build a new structure?

County bodies, including the Board of Supervisors, have been using the courthouse as their meeting space and



FILE PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

"The argument that we can use the existing building with upgrades and renovations is not realistic, it's not impossible but will actually cost more in the long run."

Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier, who also serves as the chairman of the Buildings Committee



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Hampton Supervisor Keir Whitson

could be barred from holding public meetings in the space by a judge at any point because of safety and security concerns, according to county officials.

Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier, who also serves as the chairman of the Buildings Committee, said that after conducting interviews with court and public safety officials, the recommendations were to build a new, separate structure to house just the court functions.

For Frazier and others on the Buildings Committee, the proposal to build a new structure is more "realistic" and financially feasible than adding what would essentially be a new addition to the existing historic building.

"The eventual move of the Clerk(s) and Commonwealth Attorney office would potentially free up space that can be used to get out of some of the long-term rental properties the county has been paying rent on for over 30 years," Frazier wrote in an email to the Rappahannock News. The Circuit Court Clerk and Commonwealth Attorney are currently in offices that neighbor the courthouse, but in the new design, their offices would be inside the courthouse.

Piedmont Supervisor Christine Smith, who is also a member of the Buildings Committee, did not return a request for comment. Smith has been supportive of recommendations passed to the supervisors from the Buildings Committee but has also reiterated that county officials need more public feedback.

In two separate meetings almost two years ago, county officials interviewed Circuit Court Judge Douglas Fleming, General District Court Judge Jessica Foster, Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court Judge Melissa Cupp, former Circuit Court Clerk Margaret Ralph, Combined Court Clerk Donna Foster and Rappahannock County Sheriff Connie Compton.

Their feedback, according to meeting minutes, addressed "two important goals for any improvements, first is to preserve the atmosphere and

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Rappahannock resident Jean Clements was also in attendance. Clements told the supervisors last month that judges were “shocked” they hadn’t been asked to give input since a 2021 interview with Building Committee members.

The Building Committee for more than a year has been working on plans for constructing a new courthouse at the direction of the Board of Supervisors. But, some residents have been increasingly skeptical about the need for a new building, leading some supervisors to request alternative plans.

County bodies, including the Board of Supervisors, have been using the courthouse as their meeting space and could be barred from holding public meetings in the space by a judge at any point because of safety and security concerns.

Fleming requested the Monday meeting with the county officials, and while he commended the officials’ efforts in their work to date, he reiterated the need for a drastic increase in safety measures — including adequate space between the judge’s bench and defendants, separate waiting rooms for witnesses and separate exits for judges.

Fleming said there have been instances in Rappahannock where he presided over a contentious hearing and waited inside his judge’s chambers, not wanting to walk down the same staircase and out the same exit with the defendants.

But, he said, “what a charming courthouse.” Fleming said some localities have utilized their historic courthouse for “ceremonial” events and built another larger structure to hold court.

Fleming also encouraged officials to “seriously consider” including two courtrooms in the final structure. He pointed out that a majority of defendants who are tried in Rappahannock are not residents of the county, and that number has been growing.

“Be mindful not just of the weather, but the climate around you,” Fleming said.

Building Committee members have recommended that the county build a new courthouse structure, estimating it could cost anywhere between \$9 million and \$12 million. The committee estimated that a price range for adding an addition to the existing building could be \$6.8 million. If the county renovated the historic courthouse, it would need to build another structure on the courthouse grounds in order to accommodate the county’s space needs, which could cost an additional \$4.8 million.

Cupp, a Rappahannock resident, told officials that she would love to see the historic courthouse remain exactly how it currently stands. “I love this building and I don’t want to see anything bad happen to this courthouse,” she said.

But, she said, the timeline for when the project can get done is most important to her. She said there are “years and years of studies” that show the courthouse is unsafe and that, “we

Sheriff Connie Compton shared similar concerns about safety, and said that when court is in session, “security is a nightmare.”

can’t keep doing studies. We have to eventually decide.”

Sheriff Connie Compton shared similar concerns about the safety, and said that when court is in session, “security is a nightmare.” She said it takes “a lot of manpower” for her office to provide security to the courthouse.

Commonwealth’s Attorney Art Goff said “it’s a nightmare” trying to keep witnesses, jurors and defendants separate during recess, because there’s only one waiting room inside the courthouse. He said having jurors and witnesses potentially mingling could be detrimental to a criminal trial, and almost has been in the past.

Members of the Building Committee and Board of Supervisors said they would consider Monday’s comments and review them at their next regularly scheduled meetings in October, when the supervisors will also hold a public hearing for public feedback. Officials have not yet made a decision on whether to build a new courthouse.



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Judges: Security should be key in courthouse plans

BY JULIA SHANAHAN

Rappahannock News staff

The Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors and Building Committee on Monday received guidance from key constitutional officers and judges on how to proceed forward with the

courthouse renovation project.

Chief Circuit Court Judge Douglas Fleming Jr., and Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judge Melissa Cupp painted a bleak picture of the current security standards at the historic courthouse. Both judges

agreed that abiding by modern safety protocols, and doing so as soon as possible, should be the number one factor guiding the project.

Senior Court of Appeals Judge and

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➔ identity of the Rappahannock County courthouse and second and of equal importance, is to provide a secure facility.” These items were included in the summary:

▶ All three judges were agreeable to a single courtroom shared by all courts. It is rare that two courts are held on the same day.

▶ Judges Cupp and Foster did not see the need for a second judge’s chamber as was suggested by Judge Fleming. It would be rare that more than one judge was at the courthouse on the same day.

▶ A separate entrance for judges with a route to their chamber without mixing with the general public.

▶ Provide separate inmate access into the courtroom.

▶ Sheriff Compton stressed the need for a dedicated space for court security personnel. This space is in addition to the screening station and would provide a place to rest while on breaks.

▶ Judge Cupp did not see the need for a separate hearing room. That space, she said, should be used to provide more public waiting space. The public waiting space should be divided into separate areas to allow for separation of parties with disagreements. There should also be considerations for witnesses’ waiting rooms.

The current structure lacks many of these security measures including a separate entrance for judges.

The Buildings Committee does

not have an official plan for what it will do with the empty buildings if the employees move into a new courthouse. But Frazier claimed that the total rent payments for the county’s Building Office and Extension Office over 30 years has exceeded what the buildings have sold for previously.

“So the argument that the county is going to raise taxes significantly to build a new building is wrong. We are ALREADY spending monies on rent,” Frazier wrote. “The argument that we can use the existing building with upgrades and renovations is not realistic, it’s not impossible but will actually cost more in the long run.”

In February 2022, members of the Buildings Committee presented the supervisors with photos and details of buildings in the town in need of serious repair, including the courthouse, along with concerns about access to public meetings for people with disabilities. The Buildings Committee told the supervisors that the courthouse has about one year left of remaining service life and the Commonwealth Attorney’s Office has about two to four years.

Other potential implications for renovating the existing courthouse, as presented by the Buildings Committee, include an unknown cost for having to relocate court functions for one to two years, having to potentially double the size of the courthouse to meet security and

ADA requirements, and not being able to free up office space on the courthouse “campus.”

Rappahannock County hired Alexandria-based company Wiley-Wilson in 2019 to survey the conditions of county buildings in the Town of Washington. Most of the buildings surveyed, according to the report that was released February 2020, are more than 130 years old and have “many compromised or antiquated building systems.”

The 2020 report found multiple “issues of dire concern for life safety and/or security that are recommended for immediate review and remedy.” Those concerns included:

▶ Lack of a second accessible exit in the courtroom

▶ Lack of separation between accuser/ accused, judge, jury, civil servants, witnesses, and general public

▶ Combined Court Clerk’s Office – Lack of security at building entry during office hours, and lack of separation/protection at reception from potentially violent visitors

▶ Lack of fire alarms, fire extinguishers, or other forms of fire protection

“I am sure that once the handful of dissenters see the facts, they will agree that a new courthouse makes the most sense,” Frazier wrote. “Then we can begin the process of determining what architectural style to use. That is the real decision ahead of us as a community.”

County officials seek input from residents on courthouse future

Public urged to speak at next week's hearing

BY JULIA SHANAHAN
Rappahannock News staff

The Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors, in conjunction with the Building Committee, will hold a special public hearing next week to receive more feedback from residents on the future of the historic courthouse.

The public hearing will be held during the Board of Supervisors' regular monthly meeting on Monday, Oct. 2, at 7 p.m. at the county courthouse.

The two bodies received guidance from constitutional officers and judges in the region during a joint meeting on Sept. 11. The purpose of the upcoming public hearing is to give county residents

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an opportunity to speak on the most recent information about the courthouse restoration project.

There are a few key decisions the Board of Supervisors must make in order for the Building Committee to make more substantial progress on the courthouse project, including:

Should there be a new courthouse, or should the county further explore renovating the existing historic courthouse?

Should a new (or renovated) courtroom include more than one courtroom? Chief Circuit Court Judge Douglas Fleming Jr., recommended the county consider two courtrooms, saying that there's an increase in people being prosecuted in Rappahannock County. The other two judges in attendance have said in previous interviews that they think one courtroom would suffice.

Where exactly should a new courthouse be located?

Once the county finalizes a direction, then it can begin seeking input on the finer details of the project, like design and aesthetics.

Building Committee Chair and Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier said during a Sept. 25 Building Committee meeting that some residents who have spoken at previous public hearings on the courthouse project had opinions that were

BACKGROUND

To read more about the judge's comments prior to the upcoming public hearing, visit rappnews.link/oxi



SUPERVISOR RON FRAZIER:

“We just got some misinformed people. And then we’ve got people that just want to have to say something just so that they feel relevant, they don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

based on “misinformation.”

“We just got some misinformed people,” Frazier said. “And then we’ve got people that just want to have to say something just so that they feel relevant, they don’t even know what you’re talking about. That’s part of the problem.”

The Building Committee for more than a year had been working on plans for constructing a new courthouse at the direction of the Board of Supervisors. But, some residents have been increasingly skeptical about the need for

a new building, leading some supervisors to request alternative plans.

Building Committee members have repeatedly emphasized the importance of receiving public input throughout this process, hosting a “Lemonade on the Lawn” event last summer where residents could visualize a potential new courthouse with the assistance of county officials.

Some committee members on Monday said they’ve attempted to inform and engage the public, but the members still find themselves answering the same questions.

“What I think you need to receive and hear now is, what are people’s perceptions through whatever avenues they’ve taken to inform themselves — what are they?” said County Administrator Garrey Curry to the Building Committee. “That is valuable information for you to know.”

The judges in attendance at the Sept. 11 meeting — Fleming, Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judge Melissa Cupp, and Senior Court of Appeals Judge Jean Clements — emphasized the need for a drastic increase in safety precautions.

County bodies, including the Board of Supervisors, have been using the courthouse as meeting space and could be barred from holding public meetings in the space by a judge at any point because of safety and security concerns. The judges did not indicate to the county that they would consider barring meetings.

Building Committee members walk out of meeting with supervisors

Supervisor aims to shift
management of courthouse
project to county staff

BY JULIA SHANAHAN

Rappahannock News staff

Members of the Rappahannock County Building Committee abruptly walked out of a joint meeting with the Board of Supervisors on Monday after one supervisor suggested the county explore creating an advisory body with a professional architect to lead the courthouse restoration project.

Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Van Carney, citing guidance from the Virginia Supreme Court found online, said an advisory body could be made up of a professional architect and two county constitutional officers, such as a sheriff or Circuit Court clerk. This would allow the Building Committee to focus on renovating the other deteriorating county-owned buildings in the Town of Washington, Carney said.

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That's when Building Committee members Page Glennie, Doug Elkins and Dale Waters stood up and walked out of the meeting, leaving the committee without a quorum and forced its meeting to adjourn. Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier and Piedmont Supervisor Christine Smith, who also serve on the Building Committee, did not leave the room.

"If you paid us, then you would appreciate it," Glennie said to Carney about the work the committee has done to date. "But if you do it for free, then you don't give a God damn about anything. That's exactly what's going on." Building Committee members are appointed by the Board of Supervisors and serve on a volunteer basis.

After the three members left, Frazier told Carney that he "insulted" them when he suggested they "get a professional" to lead the courthouse project. Smith also defended the credentials of the members who left the meeting.

Waters founded a company that provides building restoration consultation and preservation services for historic and sacred buildings, and Glennie worked in acquisition for the U.S. Navy. There is not a professional architect on the Building Committee.

Waters, Elkins, and Glennie did not return a request for comment for this report.

"It would be useful to the public —



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Rappahannock County Building Committee member and Amissville resident Page Glennie addresses the Board of Supervisors on Monday night. Minutes later, he and two other committee members walked out of the meeting.

this is the largest project we've ever done as a county — to get some fresh eyes on this with a professional firm that can go soup to nuts," Carney said during the meeting. "That is due diligence. And what I just experienced in this courtroom is beneath public office."

Carney said in an interview on Tuesday that he's going to request an agenda item for the Supervisors' regular meeting in November, where he will ask that county staff begin leading the courthouse project.

"If I recall, in that meeting last night,

just offering the suggestion [of an advisory body] was met with a total lack and inability to at least even talk about it," Carney said. "So where's the effectiveness in the Building Committee? It's not there."

Whitson said that he would gladly work with Carney to "lay out a very specific next step plan regarding the courthouse project" to be discussed in November after the situation cools down.

"I want to take the high road, but last night definitely gave me pause and refocused my concerns about whether we're

WATCH THE MEETING

To see full video coverage of Monday's Supervisors meeting, visit **rappnews.link/e62**



going to be able to have an objective, productive working relationship with Mr. Glennie and others," Whitson said.

Smith said in an interview that she was "surprised" at the suggestion to take away the courthouse project from the Building Committee, but declined to comment on the committee's walkout.

"[The Building Committee is] a very valuable citizen body that's been working well together and brings a lot of institutional knowledge and professional knowledge to the subject matter," Smith said.

Frazier, chairman of the Building Committee, wrote in a letter submitted to the Rappahannock News (found on Page 15), that he does "support the decision of the three Committee members that walked out, though I wish it had been less acrimonious."

A productive public hearing

The incident with the Building Committee came after some 20 residents had already weighed in during a public hearing with feedback on what the ➔

➔ county should do moving forward with the old courthouse. This was one of the most well-attended public hearings the two bodies have seen since the project started.

While there were mixed opinions, many said they wanted to see the county renovate the existing historic courthouse rather than build a new structure. The county plans to restore the historic courthouse, but the supervisors have not officially decided how it will be used by county staff.

Some residents who spoke proposed ideas, such as connecting the historic courthouse to a new structure using something like an atrium. Most people said that regardless, they want to see the county continue to use the historic courthouse in some capacity.

Many of the residents who spoke Monday came prepared with handouts and research on other courthouse projects.

“I’m standing here today to make my plea that you don’t neglect the historic buildings on this courthouse green, and that you do apply the money that’s going to be required to restore these buildings to their elegance,” said Piedmont resident Maureen Harris.

The supervisors and Building Committee received input from three judges during a Sept. 11 joint meeting, where the judges painted a bleak picture of the current safety standards at the courthouse. One judge also suggested the county consider building two courtrooms.

“I happened to be here when the judges made their presentations, and that convinced me that yes, we do need a new courthouse,” said Stonewall-Hawthorne resident and retired supervisor Chris Parrish during the hearing.