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Building a better seat for Howard County government

Amid mud, machinery, George Howard renovations on schedule for July move

By Larry Carson | larry.carson@baltsun.com

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The last Howard County employees left the George Howard Building for temporary office quarters in Columbia in November, but a few citizens still show up at the former government headquarters to try to pay their taxes.

"People think the county building is still here. They come and want to pay their taxes," ignoring the construction machines, the mud and the blue partitions intended to keep them out, said Clark Interiors' superintendent Jim Summers of the \$23.5 million renovation of the government complex on Court House Drive in Ellicott City.

"They walk straight through the fence, into the mud," Summers said.

But no one who ever did business there would recognize the inside now.

From the muddy entrance plaza where concrete was torn up to allow installation of underground cisterns to catch and recycle rainwater, to the new, thicker metal skin and multipane windows, virtually nothing remains intact, except for a randomly placed wooden door to the old Finance Department leaning against a pillar on the third floor. A huge metal cooling tower sits in the rear parking lot, awaiting a crane ride to the roof.

Even load-bearing brick walls, like one that once held a row of portraits of former county executives, are gone, replaced by huge steel beams. In their place will be a public service counter that can be locked up each evening. For security, the front doors and ground-level windows will have blast-resistant glass, and a row of 3-foot-high posts will keep vehicles away from the buildings. It will be a far cry from the aging structure that opened in 1978.

"This building was designed before computers," county public works chief James M. Irvin said, so everything has to be replaced, from the speckled floor tiles to the wiring, air ducts and room configurations.

The renovation was to have taken place a decade ago, but shifting plans for a new complex and perhaps a Circuit Court building kept putting it off, until County Executive Ken Ulman decided last year that the other options were not affordable and the work could not wait.

To help pay for the renovations, the county is trying to sell the former Gateway School on Route 108 in Clarksville, and a 24.6-acre parcel nearby that was bought in 2000 for a new campus. The old school building will be demolished next month to improve the site's appeal, Irvin said.

Even the County Council chambers, partly renovated earlier this decade to allow better access for the disabled, have been stripped almost bare. New electrical systems, sound system, ceiling tiles and energy-saving lights will go in.

The work is on schedule, said Peter Z. Garver, the county's project manager and owner of Sustainable Development Partnerships. But Irvin said county workers won't move back until July 2010. That's because it will take longer to complete renovations on two smaller buildings in the old complex, and officials want all the work finished before anyone returns.

The county's 911 center, now in the Ligon Building, will move to a temporary home at the Southern District police station near Fulton before returning next summer.

The Carroll Building, which opened in 1967, will be renovated for the county's office of law and the state's attorney's office, and a covered breezeway between the two will be enclosed for office use.

Garver said the renovated George Howard Building will be far more efficient. There will be solar panels on the roof to heat water, and the thicker windows and metal skin will improve insulation, saving more than 20 percent on energy use. Water-saving toilets and sinks will conserve up to 40 percent more water, and the rainwater cisterns will recycle storm runoff for plants. Preferential parking will go to hybrid or electric vehicles, to help score environmental points with the U.S. Green Building Council's rating system.

There will be more creature comforts for county workers, who previously had nowhere to hang their coats or sit down for lunch, except at their desks.

The County Council will have larger quarters - big enough for the five members to each have private offices larger than a closet.

The tiny snack bar in the basement will be expanded into a lunch area with seating, and the new portable walls will have coat hooks.

In addition, various offices and work areas will have small break rooms equipped with a refrigerator, a table and chairs, a microwave and a sink, Irvin said. Low-level "white noise" will come from ceiling speakers to help reduce distracting noises from co-workers in adjoining cubicles, Irvin said.

He plans to create DVD "virtual tours" of the new offices when they are nearly ready, to help employees orient themselves when they return.

Irvin knows the building's former workers are happy in their temporary, more modern offices on Stanford Boulevard in East Columbia, with a large cafeteria and close proximity to restaurants and shopping. A huge new Wegmans grocery store is to be built within walking distance. He has surveyed workers for ideas that can be included in the renovated George Howard Building, he said.

Ginny Vargo, a planning department worker who spent 19 years in the old building, likes the temporary quarters much better.

"It's clean, especially in the ladies' room. We have coat closets, and the food is very good" in the cafeteria. "I like it a lot," she said. "I was the first one to grumble when I heard we were going to move, but now I like it."

Still, the Catonsville resident is keenly aware that she lives four miles from the old building but 12.5 miles from the temporary offices, so she'll enjoy the shorter commute, she said.

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