

To the Legislature,

My name is Elizabeth Mills and I am currently employed as the Criminal Manager for Washington County Circuit Court. I have worked for Washington County Circuit Court for four years. I am enthusiastically supportive of HB 3180 - Washington County Courthouse Replacement Planning Project. Washington County's population has grown and continues to grow. Investment in this public resource is needed.

There are many issues with the existing Courthouse (built in 1912 and 1928) and the Justice Services Building (built in 1972) that effect safety, accessibility, and quality of life and services for court employees, judges, and the public. Here are a few:

### **Safety**

- The Washington County Courthouse and Justice Services Building are not up to seismic standards and would suffer serious and potentially life-threatening damage in the event of an earthquake or natural disaster.
- There are several steep staircases inside and outside the building. Falls down staircases happen often, causing injuries to the public and staff. On multiple occasions, an ambulance has been required to treat and transport serious injuries from falls down staircases at the Justice Services Building.
- Streets bordering the courthouse complex are busy, with little sidewalk space. Crosswalks are insufficient, and adverse pedestrian and vehicle interactions at intersections are constant.
- Infestations of rats, mice, and ladybugs are ongoing and treated regularly by county facilities.
- Issues with plumbing, leaks in ceilings, and HVAC problems are regularly needing to be addressed by county facilities.
- Asbestos, lead, and mold are regularly needing to be addressed by county facilities.
- Judges' chamber doors and secure staff areas are easily accessible and identifiable by the public, which creates security issues.
- Defendants in custody are transported in regular common spaces with the public through narrow hallways.
- Due to the size of courtrooms, there is little to no distance between defendants in custody and the public, including victims.

### **Accessibility**

- Courtrooms are inaccessible for individuals in wheelchairs or those with limited mobility.
- Public entrances for individuals in wheelchairs or with limited ability require the use of a steeply sloped and sharply angled ramp underneath a concrete staircase outdoors where they must wait for a security office to let them in. It is degrading and dangerous.
- Public hallways are narrow and winding, causes patrons to become lost and disoriented, and often late to court.
- The Courthouse and Justice Services Building are two separate and distinct buildings that are only connected through a ground floor hallway. Upper floors are not connected by the same elevator systems and staff or patrons must travel to the ground floor and across the complex to get to a floor in the other building.

- Jurors and staff must pass through a narrow, underground hallway with a sloped floor to travel between the jury orientation room and courtrooms. This is unsightly, inaccessible, and is a known a trip-and-fall area that is not usable for individuals in wheelchairs or with mobility aids.
- Front counter areas where the public queues to receive in-person services are dark, narrow, and have limited accessibility for those in wheelchairs or with disabilities. The public must enter through a dark lobby, open heavy double doors, and have little to no space to organize or form a line. Visibility between the public and staff is difficult.
- Parking is inadequate for staff and the public. Jurors must walk several blocks to access the courthouse from their designated parking area.

### **Quality of Life and Services**

- Courtrooms and jury rooms are small, cramped, and dark. Parties and attorneys must crowd in hallways to wait their turn to enter courtrooms. Public wishing to observe open court are subject to limited seating, and sometimes must stand in the hallway.
- There are no private meeting spaces or areas where court patrons can separate themselves from other parties or have private conversations. Attorneys currently meet with clients in small bathrooms for privacy. Victims or parties with restraining orders must stand in close proximity.
- There are limited spaces for staff to meet or areas to hold meetings.
- Staff bathroom facilities are inadequate. In the Justice Services Building, there are two single designated toilets for upwards of 62 full-time employees. Per OSHA standards, there should be at least four toilets. When there is a line, staff must walk to the other side of the building, take an elevator to the fourth floor, or use a small public bathroom.
- There are inadequate bathroom facilities for the public.
- We are out of space for employee workstations and do not have enough courtrooms. All desks are occupied, and departments have had to be separated due to lack of space and relocated far from their coworkers. This creates operational inefficiencies and challenges with shared spaces.
- Washington County Circuit Court staff are spread across three distinct buildings. Please build us a facility where we can work together and serve the public in one place.