

This Old Courthouse

Pottawatomie County's courthouse faces possible replacement

Like worn-out vehicles, there comes a point in the life of all buildings at which it costs more to continue to maintain and use them than it does to replace them.

The Pottawatomie County Courthouse in Westmoreland might have reached that tipping point; and county commissioners hope to know by next week if it is cost-effective to continue using the 1884 structure, or if it has become a money pit.

The decision to give the building a checkup came at a January commission meeting, said Dustin Trego, assistant manager of operations.

"We decided we should make sure the building is sound before we decide to move forward with using the building," he said.

So the commission hired Wamego-based structural engineer Richard Pikul to do a study of the building's structural integrity. Pikul is conducting a preliminary investigation—primarily a walk-through to check for signs of damage such as foundation settlement, cracking and sloping floors. What he found was troubling.

"There was a damaged roof truss," Pikul said. "It's an 1880's timber truss and it's cracked. There's wall settlement in various areas and some sloping floors.

The truss required immediate bracing to maintain its strength. Pikul said the building has been well-maintained for a structure that's nearly 124 years old, but that major renovations are long overdue. The most recent renovations were completed in 1999.

"It's only when you start digging into the depths that you find problems that need to be addressed," he said. "Buildings typically have an estimated life span when they're constructed of about 100 years, and after that you have to do some major work on the building. This one's over 100 years old and it needs to be looked at."

Pikul will give his full report to the commission next Friday. Worn-out buildings are torn down regularly, but municipalities will often go to extra lengths to preserve their historic courthouses.

Sarah Martin, National Register coordinator at the Kansas State Historical Society, said she could think of only one courthouse being torn down and replaced in Kansas—the Ellsworth County Courthouse in 1955—because it was old and crumbling. Most courthouse replacements, such as the Leavenworth and Dickinson County Courthouses, occurred because of fire, she said.

Martin said the KSHS commenced a study in 2002 of all Kansas Courthouses. It currently has 40 county courthouses listed in its directory and is trying to add more. The study listed construction dates for all the courthouses and their architectural styles.

The earliest Kansas courthouses are in the eastern part of the state, Martin said, with the courthouse in Chase County being the State's oldest. She said she had little information on the Pott. County Courthouse, but that it likely was either "Second Empire or Romanesque style." The courthouses in Riley and Douglas counties are Romanesque.

The state also helps counties who want to preserve, rather than replace, their courthouses. Counties can apply for grants and tax programs to help restore their historic courthouses.

"They have to follow National Park Service guidelines and re-use historic materials," Martin said. "A lot of counties have undone those not-so-good renovations from the 1960's and '70's". Martin said most of those renovations include lowered ceilings and new windows.

Many counties have taken advantage of those programs.

"The obvious example is Chase County," she said. "It's certainly most recognized. "There's also Leavenworth, Franklin County, Douglas and Riley County (which has been having work done on its clock tower).