

Groundbreaking ushers in new \$161M Yolo County Courthouse

By ELIZABETH KALFSBEEK Daily Democrat

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Woodland's judicial system broke ground for the 21st century Friday, beginning a \$161 million venture that will culminate in two years with a new Yolo County Courthouse.

After the historic groundbreaking of the Woodland-Davis Surface Water Project last year, the city hit another milestone as a plethora of city, county and state officials gathered for the groundbreaking held near Lincoln Avenue between Fifth and Sixth streets.

Both projects have been in the works for more than a decade, and both will likewise have lasting effects for generations to come. "It would seem once every 100 years we in the court community get to build a new courthouse," said Judge Dave Rosenberg, who pointed out the present courthouse was built "four score and 16 years ago" in 1917. "We truly love our historic courthouse on Court Street. It has served us reasonably well. But it was built five generations ago. We have outgrown that courthouse in almost every conceivable way."

Rosenberg, who predicted the building will be completed ahead of its estimated schedule of 2015, assured participants that the new courthouse, spanning the 1000 block of Main Street between Fifth and Sixth, will serve another four score and 16 years - or more.

The building will consolidate Yolo County's 14 courtrooms scattered among six buildings in Woodland into one six-story space, five of which will be above ground.

"Two years will go by very quickly and soon we'll be back here in 2015 to celebrate this grand, grand edifice," said California Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye. "The great accomplishment here is the work of collaboration. Sure, we'll fight. Sure, we'll throw a few elbows under the table. But at the end of the day we're all focused ... on keeping money and jobs in California."

The Yolo County Courthouse is the first to make it to the construction phase with monies earned from SB1407, or court user fees and fines. Not one tax dollar, or California's General Fund, will be used to fund the \$161.4 million project.

About \$133.8 million in lease-revenue construction bonds were sold late last year, to be repaid over a 25-year period through said court user fees and penalties.

"Yolo was a poster child for need of a new courthouse," Rosenberg said.

The new 163,000-square-foot structure will feature tall windows and a Grecian entryway, rooms for attorneys and clients to converse in private, separation facilities for witnesses and defendants, and other upgrades from the present courthouse. It will also house the county's prosecutors and public defenders.

Applause broke out when Assistant Presiding Judge Kathleen White told the audience there

will even be "adequate parking - so you don't have to move your car every two hours."

"A courthouse is not a simple building. It has unique features that make it as complicated as building a hospital," explained Rosenberg. "This courthouse really looks like a courthouse and not an insurance office. And, in case you're unsure, 'courthouse' will be emblazoned on the building."

In planning the design, there is room for expansion when new courtrooms are needed in the next generation or two, he said.

The structure was designed by Fentress Architects with Dreyfuss & Blackford and will be built by Hensel Phelps Construction Co.

It will be the largest construction project in Woodland since the late 1980s, when County Fair Mall was built. Planners say more than 450 workers are expected to take part in the project.

Friday's weather was favorable and rain held out for the groundbreaking, though there were some clouds in the sky. Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, and former Yolo County supervisor, said the weather is a metaphor for the public service "we all engage in."

There are stormy times, she said, "but there's always a silver lining with the sun shining through. That's what I'm feeling today."

Yamada, chairwoman of the Assembly Committee on Aging & Long-Term Care, said she is a supporter of longevity and loves having an old courthouse. She also echoed others' statements about having outgrown the space.

"For the 20th century that might have been good enough," she said. "But as we move into the 21st century, this building will give true meaning to liberty and justice for all."

The present courthouse at 725 Court St., is two stories with a large basement, totaling about 49,000 square feet. The building was renovated in the 1980s and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. Originally the building had only two courtrooms, with other space used as administrative offices or as board chambers for county, city and school district officials.

So far, county officials have no plan for what to do with it. Ideas floated have included museum, movie theater, brew pub and rental space for weddings and other events.

"This new courthouse is going to be a good fit for Woodland and Yolo County," Rosenberg said.

Sen. Lois Wolk said it will be more than a building. It will be a "powerful symbol ... (that) justice must serve all fairly."

After Judge Stephen Mock jumped on the backhoe and scooped some ground, guests were

treated to a spread of food and drink donated by downtown restaurants. Mock is the longest serving judge in Yolo County, having heard cases at the present courthouse for 22 years, not the full 96 its been in operation, Basha clarified in jest.

"Our goal has been to design a courthouse that serves you - the public," White concluded. "This is your house, your hall of justice."

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