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Courthouse damage: Half a million dollars?

Written by Chris Collins December 03, 2010 10:11 am

By CHRIS COLLINS
Baker City Herald

As the cleanup of the water-logged Baker County Courthouse continues, wiring is being installed to accommodate the transfer of county offices to the North Baker School.

County Commission Chair Fred Warner Jr. said today that the county hopes to have all offices moved to the temporary quarters by Monday. Problems with the Internet connection slowed progress Thursday, he said.

Insurance adjusters and contractors have begun developing a plan to begin refurbishing the building, Warner said.

“We’re looking at a considerable amount of money,” he said. “Probably in excess of \$500,000 — that’s a real ballpark figure.

“We have good insurance so we’ll work with our insurance company to try to get this place up and running.”

No exact determination has been made about what caused pipes to freeze during a weekend that wasn’t particularly cold by Baker County standards. The low temperature the week before the two pipe valves failed hit 9 below zero.

“Maybe it was bad luck,” Warner said. “We are going to make an assessment so that whatever went wrong can’t go wrong again.

“I need to bring somebody in to make that assessment,” he said.

Warner, who was in Portland for cornea transplant surgery when the flooding happened over the weekend, had been kept apprised of the damages and cleanup effort by telephone while he was away.

(Warner said his eye remains sensitive, and he will be wearing dark glasses as his recovery continues. Doctors have given him a good prognosis.)

And although he wasn’t surprised by what he saw in a walk through the building Wednesday afternoon, Warner said he was struck by the way the massive amounts of water traveled from the second floor through to the basement of the 101-year-old building.

“What got hit was hit really bad,” he said.

For example, Judge Greg Baxter’s Circuit Court chambers, directly under two water pipe valves that froze and cracked, were demolished. Other offices remained untouched.

“My office was perfectly fine,” Warner said. “There was no damage whatsoever.”

When the historic building will re-open depends largely on air-quality tests that will be done when the building has dried, he said.

The North Baker building, at 2725 Seventh St., was available because the Baker School District closed it in the spring of 2009 due to budget cuts.

A portion of the building has been used to house the district’s charter school, Baker Web Academy & Early College. Those classes have moved to the second floor of the building, and the county plans to take over the entire first floor.

Most county offices will be moved to North Baker. Exceptions are the Clerk’s and Assessor’s offices, Baker Justice Court and the Veterans Service Office,

The Clerk’s and Assessor’s offices were not damaged and will remain operating at the Courthouse. Anyone with business to conduct with those offices should visit the county’s Administrative Services Office, which can be accessed from a door on the Fourth Street side of the Courthouse, Warner said.

Justice of the Peace Lise Yervasi will be holding court at the Baker City Police Department, 1768 Auburn Ave. The Justice Court office may be reached by calling the police department’s business line at 541-524-2014.

Veterans Service Officer Jane Chandler has set up her office on the second floor of City Hall, 1655 First St. She may be reached by calling 541-524-2030.

Circuit Court is being housed in tents on the south end of the Courthouse. The tents and a technical support trailer are being provided for emergency use by the Oregon Judicial Department through Tuesday. The Circuit Court phone number remains unchanged: 541-523-6303.

Circuit Court will be closed Dec. 8-10 while Baxter is out of town. That time will be used to move the offices and Courtroom to North Baker School, Baxter said.

District Attorney Matt Shirtcliff and his staff also will remain housed in the county’s Emergency Management Command trailer near the temporary courtroom until Tuesday and then make the move to the school building in conjunction with the Circuit Court staff.

Once the move to North Baker is finalized, Warner said that because most county records have been scanned and placed on computer files, the public should be able to complete most business there that could be conducted at the Courthouse.

The County Commission, which had been scheduled to meet Dec. 1, moved its regular meeting to Dec. 8. The meeting will begin at 9 a.m at the Baker School District Office, 2090 Fourth St.

Commissioners probably will meet again on Dec. 28, Warner said. Otherwise, no regular meetings have

had to be rescheduled.

“We’re moving forward,” Warner said. “On Monday we’re going to endeavor to have everybody in at North Baker.”

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