Broken pipe valve floods Courthouse

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Baker City Herald

Baker County's historic Courthouse in Baker City was closed today after a valve on a water pipe failed during the weekend, causing extensive water damage in the 101-year-old building.

It's not clear whether the valve froze, or simply failed, said Mark Bennett, the county's emergency manager.

"We'll let the insurance folks figure that out," he said.

The broken valve is between the second and third floors of the 3fi-story Courthouse, above Circuit Court Judge Greg Baxter's chambers, Bennett said.

The valve apparently broke between Friday evening and Sunday morning, Bennett said.

The temperature plummeted to 9 below zero last week; the lowest temperature from Friday through Sunday morning was 9 above zero.

Vince Woods, who's the Courthouse's facilities manager, and District Attorney Matt Shirtcliff found water in the building, at 1995 Third St., when they came to work Sunday morning.

Bennett said Woods shut the water off and replaced the valve, which fixed the leak.

But the mess, which includes drenched carpets, ceiling tiles, books and paper records, remains.

"The water caused significant damage to different portions of the Courthouse," Bennett said. "It's going to require a massive cleanup."

Bennett said he doesn't expect to have a cost estimate for the damage for several days.

County officials have met with their insurance provider, City/County Insurance Services of Salem, he said.

Bennett said he doesn't think there's any connection between the failed valve and the county's installation last month of new controls for the Courthouse's heating and cooling systems.

The County received a grant from the state that paid $65,000 of the $79,763 project, which replaced

controls but not hardware such as pipes and valves.

In the meantime, the Baker Justice Court will convene at Baker City Hall, Bennett said.

The Oregon Department of Justice has brought its mobile courtroom to Baker City, and it should be ready by Tuesday, said Fred Warner Jr., chairman of the County Board of Commissioners.

Warner is dealing with the crisis by telephone from Portland, where he was scheduled to undergo a cornea transplant operation this afternoon.

Warner said his main goal is to ensure the Courthouse is safe to occupy for both employees and the public.

A major concern is the potential for harmful mold to grow inside the soggy building.

County officials will arrange to have the air tested for mold, asbestos and other contaminants, said Karen Spencer, information assistant for the county.

The Courthouse could re-open, with limited public services, as early as Tuesday.

Most county employees were given the day off today, with pay, Warner said.

Department heads and elected officials were working today, Bennett said.

Wednesday's County Commission meeting has been canceled and rescheduled for Dec. 8.

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