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March 18, 2025

RE: House Committee on Judiciary-Support of HB3180

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to express support for HB3180, which I am hoping will lead to the necessary funding for the replacement of the Washington County Courthouse. An updated building is crucial to meeting the growing access to justice demands from the Washington County community.

I am a family law attorney practicing primarily in Washington County. My practice is focused on representing children in their parents' dissolutions and modifications, and I am in the courthouse on a regular basis. Normally I am in the courtrooms themselves, but I also spend a lot of time in the hallways and "cafeteria" while waiting for my cases to begin. Recently I was called for jury duty and had brief experience of the courthouse from a juror's perspective as well. Based on these experiences I can tell you that the following are some, but not all, of the areas of concern for our courthouse:

1. Entering the courthouse itself can be a challenge. Currently, members of the public who want to enter the courthouse must stand outside in the elements while waiting their turn to pass through security stations that are located directly inside the doors to the building. The lines to enter the building are often long, especially at 9:00 a.m., so that people have to stand in the heat, freezing cold, wind, snow, hail, and rain. The lines move slowly because there is only one security station at each door. Not only does this keep people out in the elements for longer periods of time, but it can also cause hearings and trials to be delayed while waiting for litigants to be able to get in the door and to the appropriate courtrooms. The ability to access the entryways themselves can be hard for people who have difficulty walking or who are in wheelchairs. At the 2nd Street entrance, there is a ramp to the main door, but once inside the building a person challenged by stairs must take a small, somewhat questionable-appearing lift to get up to the next level in order to move down the halls to the courtrooms. At the 1st Street entrance, the ramp actually leads to the basement of the courthouse, not the main floors of the building.
2. Many of our courtrooms are not ADA compliant. Larger wheelchairs cannot get through some of the doorways, and many of the witness stands and jury boxes do not have ramps or dedicated seating areas for people needing accommodation.
3. The juror holding area is not large enough to accommodate all of the jury pool. Some people are held on the main floor by the 2nd Street entrance, while others are shuffled downstairs and through a narrow hallway to a room in the basement.
4. The chairs in at least one jury box are anchored to the floor and spaced so poorly that it is difficult for even an able-bodied person, myself included, to get in and out of the box.

5. The courtrooms are older and not equipped with modern technology. Attempts to place large screens for remote appearances are difficult and sometimes dictated by the location of electrical outlets. This often means that not everyone can see the screen adequately during a trial or hearing.
6. There is one attorney conference/meeting room in the courthouse of which I am aware. This means that attorneys are forced to meet with their clients out in the open, so that attorney-client privilege is extremely difficult, if not impossible at times, to safeguard. In addition, attempts to conduct settlement meetings are challenging, as there is no place to go for privacy. Just this week I was unable to avoid overhearing a group of people trying to settle a case in the "cafeteria" because they had no other place to go—the parties were clearly upset and using raised voices while their attorneys were trying to maintain civility, but they were in a proverbial fishbowl and the other dozen or so people throughout the room could see and hear everything they were doing and saying. The audience only served to make their situation that much more challenging for them, and much less conducive to an effective use of the court's eventual time with them.
7. There are not enough tables and chairs for attorneys to meet with their clients in the space that we do have, and not enough electrical outlets available for charging the electronic devices that are needed throughout the day.
8. Family law judges, at least, often have several cases docketed for the same day and time, leaving litigants in the hallways trying to move their cases forward on their own while waiting for their time in front of the judge. However, as noted above, there is no real privacy for litigants to be able to speak with their attorneys during these periods.
9. Our county's population is growing very quickly to the point that we need more judges, but we also need more courtrooms in which to put them. At the moment we have a judge who does not have a permanent courtroom.
10. Because our courthouse is now so limited in space, our Family Law Assistance Program's space has been severely downsized, leaving no real workspace for people who are trying to utilize the program's services.
11. We do not currently have the space to be able to offer childcare for litigants. Parents often bring their children into the courthouse, presumably because they cannot afford formal childcare and have no one to watch the children while they attend court or seek the assistance of the Family Law Assistance Program. It would be a tremendous service to our community to offer childcare, to help make the access of our community to justice and legal help a bit easier.

These are just a few of the issues that come to mind as I think about our courthouse. Based on these concerns and many others, I would greatly appreciate your support of HB3180.

Very Truly Yours,



Laurie H. Zwingli