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'It is a magnificent building'

By MICHAEL P. RELAHAN , Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER - Elegant. Functional. High-tech.

Asked to pick from those adjectives to describe the new Chester County Justice Center on a recent tour of the building, Christine Geunther, the county's assistant director of facilities, couldn't.

"It's a little bit of all of the above," she said.

The half-million-square-foot building that rises seven stories above the 200 block of West Market Street in the county seat does, in fact, contain a dash of elegance, a boat load of functionality and enough high-tech gadgetry and greenery to keep its visitors engaged.

There is the formal beauty of the cherry wainscoting and crown molding in the courtrooms, as well as a circular tray ceiling that adorns the main courtroom, Courtroom One - that echoes the antique chandelier in the historic county courthouse - with its widescreen, tree-top view of West Chester skyline (the top of the water tower at the Chester County prison rising somewhat symbolically in the distance.)

There are the purposefully efficient back corridors of the building's nine criminal courtrooms, where prisoners can be whisked securely from their basement holding cells to the courtroom via a secure elevator, well out of the sight of the public.

Finally, there are the numerous modern bells and whistles that befit the Internet age, including a "pink noise" machine that will shield jurors from off-the-record, sidebar conferences between judges and attorneys, drop-down video screens that emerge from the courtroom ceiling and even remote-controlled window blinds a judge can activate from the bench.

"I think it is a magnificent building," said county Sheriff Carolyn "Bunny" Welsh, whose deputies will oversee security within its eight floors. "This building represents the biggest change in the courts in more than a century. It's a tremendous challenge, but it is exciting too."

As of today, the county intends to open the building for business in late September after two four-day weekend moving operations from the current courthouse.

Prior to that, the county will host two days of preview events at the center, including a

ribbon cutting ceremony on Sept. 7 for county and borough officials and public tours, and a Sept. 8 event for borough business owners who have had to deal with the demands of the two-year-long construction process. Sort of a "thanks-for-your-support" gesture, a county spokeswoman said.

But first, the building must pass muster with borough building inspectors and officials from the state Department of Licenses and Inspections. Donald Thompson, the county construction projects supervisor, said he anticipated those checks to go smoothly.

Thompson said he expects those inspectors will have suggestions to make and issues they want resolved, but that they will be relatively minor ones - such as putting a metal hand railing alongside an ornamental wooden banister in the lobby's central stairway.

"It is impossible, even in a small building that something won't need to be corrected. But the things that are typically found are all correctable and doable, and rather minor," Thompson said Wednesday.

Construction of the building is all but complete, with most of the work now including installation of furniture, fixtures and equipment. The hallways of the building are dusty with wood, plaster and paint detritus and are jammed with cardboard boxes of furniture and stacks of filing cabinets. Empty paint cans are strewn about, and the walls are spotted with stickers identifying chipped or nicked areas that need attention.

But beneath the construction veneer, it is easy to see what the building will look like once completed.

There are 18 main courtrooms, all but three finished and ready for use - the remaining ones await new Common Pleas judges as they come on board. The courtrooms are paneled in dark cherry wood - "designed with the elegance that demands the respect of the courts," Geunther said - except for one, which is paneled in oak to match a historic judges' bench that was moved from historic Courtroom Three and brought to the new center.

There are also eight courtrooms for the county's special judicial masters and a section on the first floor for West Chester's Magisterial District Court 15-1-01.

The eight floors will hold all the county's court-related offices, with each floor and each office having a specific level of security.

Geunther said unlike the current courthouse set-up, where employees from one department may have equal access to another department's offices, now access for the 643 employees in the building will be determined only by a person's job assignment.

Additionally, the public offices - such as the clerk of courts, prothonotary, register of wills, etc. - will have their own security level.

Judicial chambers will not be accessible to the public, as they are now. The chambers are off a secure corridor that runs the permitted area of the building on its sixth and seventh floors, and attorneys and others will be allowed in only through locked doors.

The security levels were required for the building in the wake of violence at other courthouses and have been overseen by Welsh's staff, which has had consultants walk through the building to make suggestions on three occasions.

"The scope and magnitude of this building is hard to understand until you've been through it," said Welsh on Wednesday.

She is beginning to acquaint her deputies with the issues of court security and prisoner movement they will face and is holding training sessions that will resemble a typical day's work "from sally port to courtroom," she said.

"There are a lot of features in this building that will make our job more efficient," Welsh said. "But it is a huge undertaking, half a million square feet."

"Nevertheless, it is an elegant building, isn't it?" she said.

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