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HB 614

Testimony on House Bill 614
House Appropriations Committee
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In House Bill 614, the "County Courthouse Restoration Act," Representative Chris Harris has recognized and brought attention to three important facts about the state of county courthouses across Montana.

First, of the 56 courthouses across the state, 48 are historic buildings – that is, they are over 50 years old. The oldest, the current Madison County Courthouse building, dates to 1876. Many others were built at the turn-of-the-century. Some are just becoming of historic age, such as the Wibaux County Courthouse constructed in 1950. Thirteen county courthouses have been listed in the National Register of Historic Places for their distinctive architecture and for their role in the development of local governments. Many more are likely eligible for listing in the Register, but simply have not been researched and submitted to the State Historic Preservation Review Board for consideration.

HB614 also recognizes that the condition of our state's historic county courthouses in many cases is one of potential jeopardy – with many buildings only in poor to fair condition. As these landmarks get older, they are more and more in need of repair and attention. As technology and functions have changed, there are also demands for altering interior spaces, upgrading utilities and telecommunications capability, and providing ADA compliance. The challenge facing counties often comes down to one of saving and rehabilitating these architectural monuments or tearing them down and building new, but less historically significant, structures. The pressures have become so great that the statewide non-profit Montana Preservation Alliance identified county courthouses statewide on its Most Endangered Historic Places list in 2002 and they are featured on this year's historic preservation poster.

Finally, HB614 also recognizes that many city-county governments lack the expertise, funding and staff to fully evaluate and explore options to preserve their historic courthouses and bring them into the 21st century. While some counties – for example Lewis and Clark County, Missoula County, Jefferson County, Teton County and most recently Madison County – have found creative ways to adapt and finance restoration and rehabilitation projects, many counties are without the resources to even get started in planning to preserve their local government landmarks.

In acknowledgement of the situation, HB614 mandates that the State Historic Preservation Office of the Montana Historical Society establish a program to assist counties, as requested by county commissioners, in their efforts to restore and rehabilitate their historic courthouses. Specifically, HB614 calls for the Preservation Office - in consultation with the appropriate county officials - to do condition assessments for county courthouses and make recommendations, estimate the costs of restoration or rehabilitation, provide other technical

assistance as needed, and assist counties in obtaining finances for preservation projects. These activities – *while beyond what the State Historic Preservation Office currently does because of a lack of staff and funds* – are certainly consistent with the state's historic preservation plan and the State Historic Preservation Office duties. In 2002, in fact, the Preservation Office participated in a day-long preservation workshop sponsored by the Montana Preservation Alliance in looking at alternative rehabilitation options for the historic Stillwater County courthouse in Columbus – now being considered for demolition and replacement. A handout from that workshop is attached to this testimony. The Preservation Office has also played an important role in commenting on most existing courthouse rehabilitation projects in its review and compliance role for the use of federal funds or loans under the National Historic Preservation Act, including current work for the Madison County courthouse in Virginia City supported by a matching grant from the National Park Service Save America's Treasures program.

In conclusion, the Montana Historical Society has been participating in a limited and largely opportunistic way in commenting and advising on county courthouse rehabilitation efforts. HB614 would move the Society into more of an active program of analysis, cost estimation, and on-going technical assistance. This will require appropriate funding to become a reality. The investment now in the condition analysis of these important historic courthouses would save future renovation dollars and would assist counties in identifying the preservation work necessary to maintain the integrity of these great structures. Therefore, we support HB614.