

Testimony on HB 614
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During the late 19th and early 20th century, Montana was organized into 56 counties, each within a short time boasting its very own courthouse. Each courthouse was a source of great pride and a symbol of the strength of regional communities. Then and now, it is the place where people vote, hold court and house records of great importance to our lives – plats of young towns, deeds to property, voter records, marriage licenses, death certificates, marking all of the currents of life. In a state as vast as Montana, the courthouse as a civic building held its own importance that locally placed it on equal footing with the capitol.

Today, we are fortunate that of 56, we still have 48 counties with historic courthouses. Of those, almost half are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and many more are worthy of such an honor. Because they are historic, these buildings are reaching an age where they are in need of upgrade and repair. Designs that worked 50 and 100 years ago, now need updating. Today, such things as telecommunications and ADA guidelines challenge counties to maintain their landmark buildings while adapting to the modern world.

We compiled a photo guide to some of Montana's treasured courthouses, and as you can see, we have a great variety in scale and architecture. Montana counties enlisted the best architects our state had to offer -- John C Paulsen, AJ Gibson, Link & Haire, Bell & Kent appear on the list repeatedly. And in each courthouse facade, you can read a sense of pride in the present and hopes for a bright future. This is a legacy that we were handed and one for which we hope to be good stewards.

Currently, when it comes to preserving courthouses, county governments must go it alone. And the challenges are daunting. Funding maintenance, and making improvements for accessibility are two big challenges of our time. Most need elevators, most need accessible meeting rooms. Many need good windows and heating systems. Better linkage with law enforcement. Despite the fact that courthouses play a broad role -- for the State whose programs are often housed in these buildings, for Business and tourism for whom courthouses can be a magnet -- there is no assistance for counties needing to work on their courthouses.

As counties work to meet the needs, they have varied success:

Some of the bigger counties have kept up with ongoing maintenance. Lewis & Clark County over 15 years has worked on outside masonry, roofing and adding a law enforcement facility, Cascade County has

updated the interior and created a new courtroom for a 4th judge, Jefferson County repaired masonry and other things.

Smaller counties are trying when they can. Madison County got federal funds to replace later bad windows with the right ones, they still have ADA issues. In Stillwater County their courthouse has deferred maintenance for many years, their records storage is inadequate and with an upstairs courtroom, accessibility is a huge issue.

Other states have preservation programs that provide grant funds for restoration of all kinds of significant historic buildings. Montana has not developed such assistance, and over time we hope to do so. We can look up to Texas, where during the George Bush administration they allocated \$100 million dollars in matching funds to help their counties refurbish courthouses. It's a fabulous program, and when the work is completed, each county celebrates with a rededication ceremony.

For us, for now, HB 614 is a practical first step to give our counties a helping hand. One of the biggest tasks is to simply figure out what is needed to fix up courthouses, and how much it will cost. That takes the services of a trained historical architect. With a solid restoration plan and cost estimates in hand, a county can then proceed to seek grants and loans to help finance their projects.

HB 614 will provide expertise to towns and counties where it is not available. It will help position counties to find the funds they need and help them to be successful. It is a modest program but an important one. We urge you to support this program by voting do pass on HB 614.