

The Sun

**District Court Building is taking shape
Courthouse, to be finished next summer, will relieve crowding of current facility**

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September 15, 1997 Page(s): 3B
Edition: ARUNDEL
Section: NEWS
Length: 606 words
Record Number: BSUN09150255

The two-story iron skeleton of a new District Court building has taken over the intersection once dominated by an Elks Lodge and the Naval Academy stadium.

The building, to be completed next summer, will give judges, lawyers and other court personnel more than double the space they have had in the cramped Tawes Office Building across Taylor Avenue from the new building.

"It's overcrowded there," said Betty Thompson, clerk for Chief District Judge Martha F. Rasin.

On a typical day, the entrance to the Tawes building is jammed with police officers, judges, lawyers and people with traffic tickets awaiting hearings in one of the three small courtrooms.

Other state agencies share the rest of the four-story building. A pseudo-office created by portable walls and chairs sits to the right of the entrance, next to three rows of chairs where people await trial.

The crowding got so bad that Rasin has moved some of her offices into the Courts of Appeal building next door.

"We evolved from that need for space and expanded into [the Courts of Appeal] building," Thompson said.

Plans for the new courthouse began to take shape in 1990, a year after the General Assembly authorized an increase from six to seven judges in Anne Arundel because of the growing case load.

Crime grew steadily through the late 1980s, according to county statistics, requiring more judges to handle more hearings. Last year, the legislature added another judgeship to the Anne Arundel court.

The state bought the 6.9-acre site at Rowe Boulevard and Taylor Avenue from the Annapolis Elks Lodge for \$3.6 million in March 1996.

The lodge decided to move in 1994 after the Court of Appeals upheld a county ban on liquor licenses for clubs that exclude members "on the basis of race, sex, religion, physical handicap or national origin." The Elks Club prohibits women from being members.

The state Board of Public Works awarded the \$11 million construction contract to Blake Construction of Cheverly, the lowest of eight bidders, and construction began in March, said Dave Humphrey, spokesman for the state General Services Administration.

The building was designed by John A. Ammon and Associates Inc., of Baltimore and Spillis Candella/Warneche at a cost of \$745,311. As requested by GSA and the District Court, community input on the building was sought in the planning stage.

The building, named for Robert F. Sweeney, the first chief judge of the District Court system when it was created in 1971, will contain four courtrooms with room for a fifth, Humphrey said.

The 930,498-square-foot building also will house offices for the public defender, parole and probation staff, the drunken-driver monitoring program and court administrators, all of which are considered "essential" to the District Court, Thompson said.

Some District Court administrative and fiscal offices will remain in the Tawes complex, Humphrey said.

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Public parking will be available at the Naval Academy Athletic Association lot across from the Tawes building. A footbridge will connect the parking lot to the new courthouse, Humphrey said.

Graphics:

ILLUSTRATION

Caption:

More than double the space: A rendering of the Robert F. Sweeney District Court Building in Annapolis, which will offer more room than the Tawes Office Building, where the court is now located.

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