

The Sun

**Lawmakers to fight District Court closures  
State law calls for Dundalk and Owings Mills facilities to be phased out by 1999**

by Jay Apperson

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Baltimore County legislators are girding for a renewed campaign to retain District Court facilities in Owings Mills and Dundalk, even as a long-debated plan to close those court operations is to move forward with the start of the new year.

With state law requiring the facilities to be closed by 1999, officials will begin to reduce the number of cases heard at the Owings Mills location starting next month, said Martha F. Rasin, chief judge of Maryland District Court.

Noting security problems at the Owings Mills facility, the judge said only small claims civil cases will be heard there. Criminal and traffic cases that would have been heard in Owings Mills will be heard at the District Court in Catonsville.

"There's no point in putting a lot of money into that site. It's like trying to make a barn into the Taj Mahal," Rasin said. "We're grateful for the site. It served our purpose. We're just moving on."

Rasin said the Owings Mills and Dundalk courts' closing is part of a plan to streamline District Court operations in the county. But politicians and community leaders say a lack of adequate public transportation might make it difficult for some people to go to court if the Dundalk and Owings Mills locations close.

Lawmakers from the eastern part of the county have filed a bill that would keep a District Court in Dundalk, said state Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr., a Dundalk Democrat.

County officials, recognizing that the space leased for the Dundalk court is inadequate, have offered to lease "at a nominal rent" space in the county's government center in Dundalk for courtroom use.

Some residents in the northwest part of the county say court officials should reconsider the plan that would remove court facilities from their rapidly growing area.

"With the growth of the Owings Mills Town Center there certainly is going to be a greater demand on [the court] in the future, so it doesn't seem appropriate for it to be taken away from us," said George Harman, president of the Reisterstown-Owings Mills-Glyndon Coordinating Council, a community group. He said his group will ask Rasin to reconsider the closing.

State Sen. Paula C. Hollinger said she might fight for court facilities in Owings Mills or Pikesville -- even though she said she had to "sign in blood" that she would not seek further delays in closing the Owings Mills court when legislators approved a two-year extension for the court last year.

"I don't necessarily give up the battle as far as the future is concerned," Hollinger, a Pikesville Democrat, said. "I don't think we're in a position to justify it right now, but we may be in the future."

"Somebody else can put the bill in. There are all kinds of ways."

Rasin acknowledged that it might have made sense to plan for a courthouse in a growth center such as Owings Mills, but she added: "We're not starting with a clean slate. I don't think the legislature would favor tearing down [the courthouse in] Catonsville to put a courthouse in another area."

The fate of the two court facilities has long been a source of friction between county legislators and Maryland court officials.

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Robert F. Sweeney, Rasin's predecessor as chief judge of the District Court, argued that the courts were unneeded and that money spent to keep the two courts operating in rented spaces could be better spent.

He argued that the larger courthouse built several years ago in Towson gave the county three modern, state-owned court buildings with as many courtrooms as more populous counties such as Montgomery and Prince George's.

Also, Baltimore County's five District Court locations are more than in any other county. Baltimore County legislators argue that five courts are needed because of the county's unique, horseshoe-shaped geography.

Del. Michael J. Finifter, an Owings Mills Democrat, said court officials should consider plans for a facility to serve the growing population in northwest Baltimore County. He said the legislation that extended the courts' existence in Owings Mills and Dundalk called for them to stay open until summer 1999 to make them as convenient and available to as many people as possible.

He said the plan to phase out cases in Owings Mills does neither.

"It seems the intent of the legislation was to keep the court functioning as it currently is in Owings Mills until 1999," he said. "If you take out these other cases, you're increasing the inconvenience and you're decreasing the availability."

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