

CCN Transcript: Mammoth Lakes Groundbreaking – posted 6/14/10

Mammoth Lakes in Mono County has some of the most beautiful scenery in the country. But on a list of the worst California state court facilities, Mammoth Lakes is right near the top. The court leases space on the third floor of a strip mall, right above a sushi restaurant – often noisy, with pervasive odors. The court space is just over 73-hundred square feet; very tight quarters for two judges and 10 staff, and all those files jammed in everywhere.

Kay Richmond, Civil Clerk *“We’re increasing in population and crime and cases and there’s just not enough room here to satisfy that need.”*

There’s no room for a self help center, so customers are sent to an office a half mile away. And security is dicey - judges must use the public hallways.

Karen Goforth, Operations Manager *“So our judges have to walk out this door to the courtroom through the public access area.”*

Sometimes they roast, sometimes they freeze. The heating and air conditioning system is ancient.

Hector Gonzalez, Mono Superior Court CEO *“It hasn’t been maintained for quite a number of years. The whole building has just gone into receivership.”*

Which means service and maintenance is uncertain.

Leanne Kozak, AOC Communications Specialist *“And in the wintertime when it snows and then it rains, it gets very heavy up on the roof, which causes leaks, comes down right here, you can still see the stains from the last time it happened.”*

Hector Gonzalez, Mono Superior Court CEO *“We actually had a jury in there, with buckets all around, drips were going and they were conducting court business at the same time. You don’t want to have a court in a location like this where you have to worry about what’s going to happen from minute to minute in terms of leaks, or heat going out. In a mountain community like this you really have to have a building you can count on. This is not a building we can count on.”*

The other courthouse in Mono County is an hour up the road in Bridgeport. It’s a local treasure. Quaint, but impractical for modern needs.

Hector Gonzalez, Mono Superior Court CEO *“It’s like a little historical gem of what a courthouse looked like in the 1880s and we’ll try to maintain it as long as we can.”*

The courtroom here is in use 2 days a week, mostly for criminal arraignments.

Hector Gonzalez, Mono Superior Court CEO *“Most of our in custodies are across the street from that old courthouse in the only county jail that we have. It makes that old historical courtroom very valuable for us to be able to keep for criminal cases.”*

But 90% of the workload is in the Mammoth Lakes area, thanks to recreational visitors. So the new courthouse is underway here, after a long, complicated land exchange.

Hon. Edward Forstenzer, Former Mono Presiding Judge *“Finally getting started.”*

The court parcel is just shy of 2 acres, part of a 7 acre civic center planned for the site.

Mono Mayor Pro Tem John Eastman *“This is a facility that will provide the long term needs for the community of Mammoth Lakes as well as southern Mono County for years to come.”*

There'll be 20-thousand square feet of space, including 2 courtrooms. It'll cost about 21.5 million dollars.

Lee Willoughby, Director, AOC Construction/Management *“Funding comes from fines and fees, a percentage that's added on, so our whole program, with all of these projects, nothing comes out of the general fund.”*

It's a lean, modest building, going up quickly.

Hon. Stanley L. Eller *“I'm amazed, I was told today that this may be finished by August 2011, so we're pretty excited.”*

Hon. Edward Forstenzer, Former Mono Presiding Judge *“It's just absolutely thrilling to see this day; finally get to start the construction of the courthouse.”*

I'm Leanne Kozak reporting from Mammoth Lakes, Mono County, for California Courts News.