

**Title: Porterville New Courthouse**

**Date: August 20, 2009**

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It's 7 in the morning, and people are already lining up to get into the courthouse in Porterville, Tulare County. Parking is a challenge, with only 20 spaces.

Hon. Glade Roper, Superior Court of Tulare County: *"The ones that get here early are the lucky ones."*

There's only one entrance, so every morning there's a line. Sergeant Winters keeps a customer count.

Sgt. David Winters, Tulare County Sheriff's Dept: *"On June 1st we had 1,062 people come in. Average all week was probably about 650. Feel like sardines sometimes."*

Even on slow days like this one, corridors are jammed.

Hon. Glade Roper, Superior Court of Tulare County: *"It's a horrendous security concern. You've got 100 jurors, you've got witnesses, you got the defendant, the victims, the attorneys, all standing literally breast to breast in this hallway. It's an unsafe and uncomfortable situation for everybody."*

Many are lined up with cash in hand.

Hon. Glade Roper: *"We bring in about a half a million dollars a month in people paying fines and fees. This is a poor community. A lot of people just don't have checking accounts. It just seems crazy to make people wait in line a half hour to pay us money."*

And there are also folks there who answered the call to jury service.

Hon. Glade Roper, Superior Court of Tulare County: *"People are donating their time to come and serve as jurors; they shouldn't have to be put in an uncomfortable position like that."*

On the other side of the counter, it's equally tight. Clerks and files are squeezed together into every square inch of space.

Janis Huerta, Tulare Court Clerk: *"We kind of fall over each other sometimes, but the work does get done."*

Daniela Nava, Tulare Court Clerk: *"We're all best friends here pretty much, we have to be."*

Office supplies are stashed up there.

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Karen Pintek, Tulare Court Mgr. *"They're falling off! You have to be very careful."*

Even closet space does double duty.

Leticia Rodriguez, Tulare Court Mgr.: *"This is where the girls come in and retrieve their minute orders every day all day long, but at the same time it's our computer room:"*

It gets pretty warm in Porterville, but the building's climate control doesn't work too well.

Karen Pintek, Tulare Court Mgr.: *"Some areas of the courthouse it's freezing, other areas are extremely hot, we have no control."*

It gets very uncomfortable inside the courtrooms, too. It's not unusual to have 500 cases a day on calendar in the 3 departments. Sometimes 200 people try to squeeze into a courtroom that's built to seat 60.

Hon. David Wooten, Tulare Commissioner: *"We try to crowd everybody in but there's just not enough seating space."*

Hon. Glade Roper, Superior Court of Tulare County: *"The building was designed for when there was probably 20,000 people who depended on it; now there's over 150,000 people that depend on it. We outgrew the building a long time ago."*

So a brand new courthouse is being planned. On this night, the Administrative Office of the Courts invited community members to learn about the project.

The new South Justice Center will replace the Porterville facility and consolidate one courtroom from Tulare-Pixley. It will have 9 courtrooms, 90,000 square feet, with room for growth. It'll be a secure building, with a jury assembly room, and 315 parking spaces.

After much collaboration with city government and other local and state agencies, a site has been selected: the downtown fair grounds and adjacent ball field – which the city will relocate.

If everything goes smoothly, improved access to justice will be available for this community late in 2012.

Hon. Glade Roper, Superior Court of Tulare County: *"We're really looking forward to it. We think it's going to be a showcase for the community; it will just make justice a whole lot smoother."*

I'm Leanne Kozak reporting in Tulare County for California Courts News.