

History of Staunton's Offers to Augusta County

City Proposal

The Honorable Victor Ludwig, presiding judge of the Augusta County Circuit Court, hosted several meetings with County and City leaders between August and November of 2014 to discuss the deteriorating condition of the courthouse, during which he warned the County that he would enter an order to compel them to provide adequate courthouse facilities if left in disrepair.

The County submitted its first formal proposal to the City shortly after Judge Ludwig's warning, requesting assistance with improvements to its circuit courthouse. The County estimated that a renovation would cost approximately \$10 million at the time, based on a 2012 study by Frazier Associates. The proposal included a request that the City pays 25 to 50 percent of the courthouse renovation costs—\$2.5 million to \$5 million—supposing that the City enjoys significant financial benefit from the business brought to the downtown area by its courthouse and therefore should contribute.



Although the City does not own the courthouse, nor does the City have any obligation to sustain or fund a facility that is not under its authority, the City wanted to be a good neighbor and assist the County in the renovation process.

In that spirit of cooperation, Staunton City Council deliberated over the County's proposal and responded with its first offer letter in January 2015. The City's proposal included numerous concessions and accommodations, the most significant of which was an offer to obtain historic tax credits for the project, a financial resource that could reduce renovation costs by as much as 25 percent.

County's Response

The County flatly rejected the City's offer, and subsequently turned down a second offer from City Council in March 2015, suggesting the City provide a 50 percent cash contribution to the renovation. In the March proposal, the City had also requested that the County consider consolidating all City and County courts.

The City received its first counterproposal from the County in April 2015, reiterating its demand for a 50 percent cash contribution. The County also accepted the City's offer to assist with securing \$2 million in historic tax credits and requested the following: parking validation for County courts visitors; six handicapped street parking spaces; all of the accommodations offered in the City's March 2 offer letter; and an offer to bond out the project and finance the City's share over 30 years.

In June 2015, after much deliberation, the City responded to that counterproposal with an offer of \$1.6 million in tax credits and a \$3.4 million cash contribution, plus all other previous concessions for a total of \$5 million, or 50% of the renovation costs.



New Expectations

Shortly after that, the City and the County learned that Judge Ludwig decided a long-term solution for all of the County's courts should be achieved—not just a solution for the Augusta County circuit court—and declared that all county courts must be located in the same jurisdiction. So, the County hired Moseley Architects to design a plan for a new courts complex to house all three County courts. The catch? The County wanted the complex to be built in Verona, moving all courts out of the City. However, such a move would require the approval of the County's citizens.

In an effort to come up with a plan that kept all County court facilities in Staunton and the preservation of the historic circuit courthouse in its current use, the City, in turn, hired Frazier Associates to design a plan that would help the City and County merge it all of its courts in downtown Staunton and expand court facilities, making use of the existing County courthouse, the City's courthouse and the Union Bank property across the street from the County's circuit courthouse. A similar plan was also suggested by the Judge and his secretary.

The City presented the Frazier plan—estimated to cost \$46 million—to the County in an August 2015 offer that also included a generous \$12.5 million Staunton contribution. The contribution would have accounted for 25% of the project cost, which represented the City's share of court cases if City and County courts were consolidated.

The County never responded to the August 2015 offer. Instead, they voted to put the issue on the ballot in November 2016 and let County voters decide on whether or not to move all County courts to Verona and spend \$45 million to construct the courts complex designed by Moseley Architects.

County citizens resoundingly rejected the move and the \$45 million expenditure, voting 3 to 1 to leave all County court facilities in Staunton. The rejection means that the County cannot hold a vote on the matter again for 10 years.

Latest Developments

On March 30, 2017, the County submitted a new proposal involving the renovation of the circuit courthouse and the construction of additions to the courthouse for its general district and juvenile and domestic relations courts. Staunton suggested in a letter that both bodies come together and form a joint study group to conduct an open, transparent and public process and work toward a solution.

The County never responded to the City's offer to form a joint study group. Instead, the Board appointed two of its members to work on a solution for the courthouse. Those members began talks with the City again in June.