

ABERDEEN DAILY WORLD

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Judges say closing Aberdeen court would be best option for budget

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MONTESANO — Grays Harbor District Court Judges Stephen Brown and Thomas Copland are once again pressing the county commissioners to let them close their courtroom in Aberdeen and consolidate operations in Montesano.

It's a request that's gone back and forth with multiple incarnations of the Board of County Commissioners over the past decade and came up again during the board's Monday morning meeting.

Judges Brown and Copland joined District Court Administrator Mallin Shelton in a letter to the commissioners sent Friday saying that their plan to cut their budget by the commission's mandated 3.5 percent would be to merge the Montesano and Aberdeen locations. That works out to a \$43,164 savings.

"This is to advise you that the court will not be able to comply with the county's budget contra as applied to our office so long as we continue to operate the District Court in two locations, Motesano and Aberdeen," the judges and Shelton wrote. "A cut of this magnitude requires a reduction in our staffing levels. We currently have eight full-time staff for District Court operations. A reduction of one, to seven full-time, would leave us short-handed, unable to operate our Aberdeen office."

It's an issue that's been considered several times, but always rejected because the potential savings didn't outweigh the costs and the details involved in actually doing the consolidation never were ironed out.

Utilities Director Kevin Varness, who oversees the facilities at the county, did some work on a proposal last fall, looking to see if the county could create a second District Court courtroom in the current law library on the second floor of the historic courthouse in Montesano. The proposal also studied if paperwork could be stored in an off-site building.

The county hired an architect for a design proposal, although nothing more has come from it since last fall.

The letter states that Varness' plan "is acceptable to us," although "it is not ideal."

"However, given the current budget situation, we will do what we can to make this work," they wrote.

"This is not a new issue," the judges and Shelton wrote. "We have raised this issue several times over the past years with the Board of County Commissioners. There are very few options in the event this comes to pass."

The letter notes that moving a court's operation "is not something that can happen overnight," and noted that the county commissioners will need to amend county code that specifically calls for Department 2 of District Court to be placed in Aberdeen.

The letter notes that planning must be done carefully, however, as it needs to happen soon so that the judges can capture the maximum amount of savings in 2013.

"Therefore, we need a resolution of this issue by the end of February," the letter states. "The last time we re-organized our operations between Aberdeen and Montesano, the process took at least three months."

County Commissioner Frank Gordon said he likes the initial thought of combining offices, and notes that one solution for finding a third Superior Court courtroom — a part of the ongoing lawsuit with the judges — could be to use the one the District Court would abandon at the Pearsall Building in Aberdeen. That would take a lot of thought and more staffing for Superior Court to figure out, though, he noted.

Commissioner Herb Welch said that before the county makes any decisions, the commissioners need to sit down with Varness and Budget Director Brenda Sherman to figure out the possible details. Of course, they also need to talk with the District Court judges and their staff.

County Commissioner Wes Cormier said another option could be to forgive some of the potential cuts the District Court has been asked to do.

"Is 3.5 percent the cut we want to do?" Cormier asked his fellow commissioners. "A lot of departments are squirming right now. ... We need to address this sooner rather than later."