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Courthouse remodel sets off alarms

Two visions for the Spokane County Courthouse collided this week at a security scanner.

County commissioners learned Tuesday that a half-million-dollar remodeling project placed a door on the wrong side of a security station.

Wrong, anyway, now that commissioners have decided that security screeners shouldn't be moved to the second floor as originally planned.

A messy work-around is likely in the short term, but the long-term solution may be to reopen the front door.

Currently, public entrances are at the west end of the courthouse and at the back of the courthouse annex, with scanners at each entrance.

The door to a new vehicle licensing office scheduled to open this fall is near the west entrance, in front of the scanner. Moving the scanner closer to the entrance to get it in front of the licensing office door would require people to line up outdoors more often than they already do.

The problem may be resolved by moving the scanner to the opposite side of the hall and allowing licensing office visitors to double back behind a partition.

Commissioners agreed a better solution would be to close the west side entrance, and move that scanner to the courthouse's now-closed front entrance.

Closing the front door has created confusion and inconvenience, Commissioner Mark Richard said.

A wheelchair ramp would be required, and Facilities Director Ron Oscarson said he thinks an "aesthetically pleasing" one can be designed.

"We'll certainly look toward that now," he said in an interview.

It's not clear when and how county officials got their signals crossed, but commissioners unanimously declared Tuesday that they no longer want to allow unscreened public access. With bomb incidents on the rise, commissioners said it's no longer enough to keep guns and knives out of court.

A 2005 plan called for unfettered access to the ground floor after moving a family law court upstairs.

The idea was to make it easier for people to pay taxes, review property values, get wedding licenses or renew vehicle tabs by moving scattered offices to the first floor – and eliminating security screening in that area.

On the other hand, a security committee led by judges has argued at least since 2008 that anyone who enters the building should be screened – even employees.

The committee's chairwoman, presiding Superior Court Judge Maryann Moreno, told county commissioners Tuesday that she was "astounded" last week to discover that the public would be able to enter the new ground-floor vehicle licensing office without passing through security.

"The fact that this happened boggles my mind," Moreno said.

She and presiding District Court Judge Debra Hayes blasted county Facilities Director Ron Oscarson for failing to follow what they said is the county's new security policy.

Oscarson and Auditor Vicky Dalton said they weren't aware of any change in the plan to remove scanners from the ground floor.

"I got pretty well shellacked," Oscarson said afterward. "I must have missed something. They (commissioners) seem to remember that we weren't going to do what we did."

Commissioners Richard and Todd Mielke were unclear about when they changed their minds, and new Commissioner Al French wasn't involved.

Mielke said he thought commissioners put plans to remove ground-floor security on hold a couple of years ago, but Richard said he couldn't remember "hitting the pause button."

Records aren't available for all the commissioners' briefing sessions, but a recording of a September 2008 meeting shows the issue was discussed inconclusively. Hayes, Oscarson, Richard and Mielke participated in the discussion.

Moreno contended a May 1994 order by Superior Court Judge Richard Schroeder settled the issue by banning weapons anywhere in the courthouse.

A state law allows judges to ban weapons in the minimum area necessary to protect courts, and Schroeder said only a complete ban would be sufficient. However, his order called for signs, not security screening stations.

Metal detectors and guards weren't introduced until July 1995. County records show that, in December 2006, presiding Superior Court Judge Robert Austin reviewed the fact that a restaurant in the courthouse annex is outside a nearby security station.

The restaurant is directly underneath District Court quarters.

As chairman of the courthouse security committee, Austin called for restaurant employees to undergo background checks. He didn't call for the security station to be moved.

“That’s something we need to address in the future,” Richard said Tuesday.

He questioned whether the High Nooner restaurant’s lease requires unscreened access.

Purchasing Director Bela Kovacs said Wednesday the lease is silent on that point.