

Move The Courthouse - News Release

Maryland's 'Bridge to Nowhere' \$81.4 Million Rockville District Court House

ROCKVILLE, MD, October 2, 2008 — Rockville's *Move the Courthouse* citizen group (MCT) tomorrow is releasing State documents that it says clearly show malfeasance by the Maryland Department of General Services (DGS) related to the planned Rockville District Courthouse. The group will hold a briefing at 10:00 a.m. October 3 near City Hall to disclose its findings.

In an October 2, 2008 letter to the Maryland Board of Public Works, MTC said that the documents it obtained prove DGS “failed to exercise budgetary control, allowing the estimated cost of the project to skyrocket to more than \$81 million” and failed to “meet its statutory responsibilities to protect historical resources and evaluate potential environmental impacts.” MTC called on the Board to stop the project immediately, and conduct a full investigation of the project.

The group provided the Board with summary tables that identify specific documents containing the incriminating information, as well as copies of the actual documents it obtained from DGS files under a Maryland Public Information Act request. MTC asked in April that DGS disclose information related to how DGS complied with Maryland's Environmental Policy Act and Historical Preservation Act in selecting the location and planning the courthouse, and how it became so large and costly. MTC got access to select DGS files in September.

MTC found that State Senator Ida Ruben dictated a particular type and color of limestone and specific windows for the building. Getting these details exactly right for Senator Ruben was a design-process imperative, as e-mails between the DGS project manager and its architectural design contractors show. “I care about a front façade rendering being the same color limestone that Ida likes. I want that stone to look like the color Ida likes,” the project manager informed his contractor, or “you and I will be answering her questions for hours...and then she will want another rendering, that's when the new rendering becomes a gift to DGS from my friends at DMJM.”

A value engineering study identified tens of millions of dollars that could have been shaved from the project, such as foregoing the limestone and reducing the height of the building by cutting out wasted air space between each floor. The cost of the project has continued to escalate, however, from around \$50 million in late-2005, to \$76 million in 2007, now to \$81.4 million according to District 17's just released *Annapolis Report*.

MTC cited letters between DGS and the City of Rockville that show while the City raised concerns as early as 2001, and asked specifically in 2004 to be involved in the early design process, DGS “kept Rockville in the dark” and “snuck its design through”, getting approval from the State Architectural Review Board (ARB) before it showed Rockville the design, without even informing Rockville that it was ready to go before the ARB.

While MTC has always agreed that a new courthouse is needed in Rockville, it says now that the project as planned is a waste of taxpayers' money. "We always asked, why can't we build a better courthouse, at a better location, where adequate parking could be included? Until now, we didn't realize that we could save money in the process," said Bridget Newton, an MTC member, and Chair of Rockville's Town Center Action Team for many years. MTC says that DGS data show the 171,200 square-foot Rockville courthouse as planned would cost \$475 per square foot, fifty-four percent more per square foot than it cost to build the new Silver Spring Courthouse. That building was completed a few years ago for \$27 million (about \$309 per square foot).

MTC suggested to the Board, "... in this time of billion dollar budget deficits, the State can do better than spending more than \$81 million on this ill-conceived, extravagant, monument to wasteful government spending." It asked the Board to deny approval of the contract to demolish the old Rockville Library, which it says could save around \$3 million. Another \$7 million would come back to the State because Montgomery County would buy the site back if the courthouse is not built there. The City of Rockville had offered to buy the site previously.

MTC believes that "tens of millions of dollars more could be saved by building a courthouse with a functional design and adequate facilities, at one of several nearby, available, and more-suitable sites." The former Giant grocery site, and 255 Rockville Pike, located just outside the Circuit Court's eastern doors, were two sites mentioned.

MTC's letter to the Board, summary tables of key documents, and copies of all the documents, will be available at www.rockvillecentral.com.

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