

Multnomah County Court House (MCCH)

The downtown courthouse was built in stages between 1911 and 1914 as the seat of county government. A 1991 study of the courthouse had this to say about the structure:

“While the Multnomah County Court House (MCCH) is powerful and distinguished in its appearance, it is not constructed so as to endure the vibrations associated with significant earthquakes.

We calculate the present code would require the building to resist an earthquake force of about 5.1 million pounds, and the present proposed code change would increase this requirement to about 8 million pounds. These figures would rise to 6.4 and 10 if the Court House is to be considered an essential facility. The building’s capacity for earthquake force resistance is estimated to be between 0.5 and 2.0 million pounds. This deficiency establishes the MCCH as a “Dangerous Building” according to standards adopted by the City of Portland.

The building may be at risk of collapse, and of portions of the building falling from their proper positions, in the event of a damaging earthquake. The extent of damage would depend on the severity, timing and location of the earthquake.”
Preliminary Structural Evaluation, June 1991, Multnomah County Courthouse, Portland, Oregon. The study was prepared for Multnomah County by Van Domelen, Looigenga, McGarrigle & Knauf, Consulting Structural Engineers.

In 1993, the Board of County Commissioners removed their offices from the downtown courthouse to more modern facilities. The courthouse now houses the Circuit Court, its judges, most of the circuit court’s operations, the Office of the District Attorney, and court-related Sheriff’s operations.

In 2002, the Board of County Commissioners commissioned a study on the feasibility of re-modeling the Courthouse for future use by the circuit court. In 2003, County Chair Diane Linn formed a Blue Ribbon Task Force to study the available information and make a recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners on circuit court facilities. Based on the report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force, the Board of County Commissioners, formed three committees to recommend further action to the Board in the following areas: (1) recommend potential site locations for a new downtown courthouse; (2) recommend financing strategies for a new downtown courthouse; and, (3) recommend site proposals, financing strategies and partnership potentials for a new court facility to serve East County.

In 2007, the Board of County Commissioners approved the construction of a new justice center in Gresham, Oregon (complying with ORS 3.014) to replace the single courtroom facility. Also in 2007, the Board approved a site for a new downtown courthouse - the western bridgehead for the Hawthorn Bridge, a block bounded by Main, Madison, First and Naito Parkway. Partial funding for the East County Justice Center has been accomplished through the sale of surplus county-owned property, but the remaining funds must be identified before this project can proceed. Funding to the downtown court facility will require the voters to authorize the issuance of general obligation bonds; there is no time certain set for this vote.