

'Monumental moment' as Morgan Co. begins construction of new judicial campus

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Among the officials who attended the Morgan County Judicial Building groundbreaking Monday were Indiana Senate President Pro Tem Rod Bray, R-Martinsville (far left) and Court of Appeals of Indiana Judge Peter Foley (fourth from left, gray suit), who used to preside as a trial judge in Morgan County. (IL photo/Alexa Shrake)

After years of discussion, Morgan County has broken ground on its new \$45 million judicial building.

On Monday afternoon, community members gathered in the parking lot of the Administration Building in Martinsville to hear from local leaders and learn more about the construction, which is part of a \$72 million judicial campus project.

The new three-story Morgan County Judicial Campus will go where the Administration Building's parking lot currently is. Parking is being created across Mulberry and Columbus

streets.

The judicial campus will have six courtrooms: one circuit court, three superior courts and two hearing courts.

Morgan County Commissioners President Bryan Collier said county officials are both very excited and very nervous about the changes.

"It's a huge investment in ourselves and the future," Collier said.

The decision to build a new judicial campus came after looking at how much it would cost to renovate the historic courthouse and Administration Building. Morgan County Council President Kim Merideth said the county would have been looking at a price tag of \$90 million.



Kim Merideth

"At the time, we had some new council members that hadn't been inside the courthouse in years," Merideth said. "They had only seen the beautiful 'Hallmark' exterior that we see each Christmas. They found the inside to be a much different story when they toured it."

The first phase of the \$72 million project — the parking lot — has already begun and is nearing completion. The plan is to now use that space to house building materials during construction.

The 1857 pre-Civil War courthouse at the center of downtown Martinsville will be renovated after the completion of the judicial campus, expected in June 2025.

The last time the courthouse saw any serious upgrades was in the 1970s, when it was thought to not be structurally sound. Once it is finished being renovated this time, it will house office space for people who are currently working in the Administration Building and several other buildings in downtown Martinsville.



Bryan Collier

“We have employees working for us in basements that were never designed to have employees, in dilapidated facilities — we had rainwater coming through the ceiling, with ceiling tiles falling and hitting employees, lack of accessibility, lack of parking, security issues — and it’s a sad reality of today’s world in a working environment that made it unhealthy for employees to want to come and work here,” Collier said. “A successful business makes plans for future developments. Morgan County is doing this via this multiphase plan to bring your buildings up to date to allow the citizens of Morgan County to receive the best government services being mandated upon us.”

Former Morgan County judge and now Court of Appeals of Indiana Judge Peter Foley said one of the many issues he found with the courthouse was the lack of separation during breaks in a jury trial.

“In the last major trial I had where I was coming out after a break, I would intermix in the same hallway with attorneys, witnesses, lawyers, jurors, the defendant’s family, the victim’s family, all shuffling through the same hallway to get to a 15- or 20-minute break in the proceedings. That is unacceptable,” Foley said. “If you’re in that environment as a juror and being compelled to be there, it is our duty to ensure you serve in a safe and efficient manner.”



Judge Peter Foley

To that end, Merideth said the new facility will have separate entrances for separate parties.

“We needed to address this because unfortunately, the current facility intermixes sometimes violent offenders with families that may be there for a joyous occasion, like an adoption,” she said.

Morgan Superior Judge Brian Williams said he really appreciated the architects listening to the judiciary on what is needed to make the courtrooms more accessible.

“I’m glad we got to participate in the process to create a secure and functional courtroom,” Williams said.

He added that they got to visit the judicial campuses in Marion and Dearborn counties and learn from them.

Williams noted that everything in the new Morgan County courthouse will be local. For example, Eric Ratts, vice president of DLZ, the company used to design the new building and renovations, is from Morgan County.



Indiana Senate
President Pro Tem
Rodric Bray

“This is a monumental moment for Morgan County, and it means a lot to a lot of people,” Ratts said. “One of the really cool, neat things about this project is, me being here for my entire life, I’ve got to work with a lot of friends my same age on trying to extend our county government to the next several generations. So as proud as we as we are of you for helping develop the legacy, hopefully you’re proud of us for continuing that legacy for the generations to come.”

Indiana Senate President Pro Tempore Rodric Bray, R-Martinsville, said he remembers being a boy when they added on to the courthouse in the ‘70s, as well as a remodel in the 1990s, when he worked in the prosecutor’s office.

“We arrived at another step in the Morgan County’s metamorphosis, and it’s just another sign that we are continuing to grow and continuing to thrive and continuing to adapt to the necessary changes that come upon us,” Bray said.