

FRANKLIN COUNTY MUNICIPAL COURT

375 South High Street | Columbus, Ohio 43215

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 12, 2026

Municipal Court Outlines Concerns Over Building Deterioration and the Feasibility of Renovation

The Bottom Line

- Pictures from [around the courthouse available here](#) show some of the building issues, including metal wall supports that have rusted and are no longer attached to the footer, stains on vents throughout the building that are black and have not been tested, and evidence of active water leaks. On Aug. 7, city inspectors conducted a preliminary walkthrough and reported finding no violations; the Court maintains that the conditions documented in these photos speak for themselves and warrant further, thorough review.
- There is no secure judicial parking, requiring supplemental security staffing as judges arrive and leave the courthouse — a gap that has already led to one judge being surveilled and followed from their vehicle into the courthouse by a stalker, and another being stalked and threatened, along with other public officials, by an individual now in federal custody as a result of those crimes. Renovation, as currently discussed, would not add secure parking.
- The new courthouse remained fully funded at the time of cancellation — \$370 million in combined bond and capital commitments against the City's own \$335 million cost estimate — meaning this decision reflects a choice to redirect already-committed resources, not a genuine funding shortfall.
- There is no safe way to hold someone in custody at the Municipal Courthouse. In-custody defendants, awaiting trial, are escorted through the same halls used by judges, staff, and attorneys.
- Two inmates have escaped because of the security deficiencies outlined in this release — one in 2013 and another in 2018.
- Elevators break down almost every week, including a two-hour entrapment of the Court's own Security Director just last week. When elevators fail, entire floors — including courtrooms — can only be reached by the stairs.
- People with disabilities often can't even use the restrooms independently in this building. They must leave and find a working one somewhere else or have someone assist them.
- The fire alarm system is decades past its expected lifespan, and replacement parts come from secondhand marketplaces because the originals are no longer made.

On July 29, 2026, without any prior indication, the City of Columbus notified the Municipal Court that it is canceling construction of the new Municipal Court building planned for the east side of South

High Street bounded by Mound and Fulton Streets, citing rising construction costs and constrained city finances. The City instead intends to renovate the Court's current building at 375 South High Street, together with the Karnes Building, across the street at 410 South High Street, with work expected to roll through 2034 and 2035.

The Municipal Court employs approximately 293 staff who work in this building, alongside more than 180 Clerk of Courts and 101 City Attorney's office employees. All these employees dedicate their daily lives to serving the people of this community, often under the very conditions described in this statement, and all are affected by this decision. The Municipal Court is the largest municipal court in the state of Ohio, and, by a wide margin, the City's most visited building – 517,000 visitors last year alone.

The Court issues this statement to provide additional context to the community and the media about this project's history, its funding, and what this decision means for the people of Franklin County, whom the Court serves every day.

This decision was made without any input or communication from the judges, court administration, or staff who occupy this building every day — the people with the most direct knowledge of its condition and operational demands.

The Court also wants to clear up some public confusion about which building is involved. Downtown Columbus is home to several courts in close proximity, and some members of the public have understood this project to involve the Common Pleas Court located at 345 South High Street. It does not. This is not the same building. The Common Pleas Court moved into its newly constructed courthouse on June 6, 2011. **The Municipal Court, which is the judicial branch of the City of Columbus, with countywide jurisdiction, remains in its building, built in 1979, at the southwest corner of Fulton and High Streets** — the same site that was returned to Franklin County as part of the real estate transaction that provided land for the Municipal Court's planned new construction.

The Court's judges invite the Mayor, the Columbus City Council, and members of the media to visit the Court and see its facilities and programs firsthand. The Court would like to offer insight into its day-to-day operations, given the City's determination that its continued operation during a multi-year renovation is in the best interests of the Court and the public it serves.

Decades of Documented Deficiencies

- City reviews completed in 2012 and 2018 documented significant security and operational deficiencies at 375 South High Street. Large-scale renovation plans followed both reviews and were never completed, largely due to projected cost — the same rationale cited today. Delay has only continued to drive costs higher.
- In 2018, Municipal Court judges and City administrators agreed that new construction, even at greater cost, made more sense than renovating an occupied, high-rise building that houses a high-volume courthouse in phases. That agreement notwithstanding, substantive work did not begin until 2021, three years during which construction costs kept climbing. The project has

since been fully designed and is now shovel-ready. The City now proposes to abandon that work for the very approach it rejected in 2018, without explaining what has changed to make renovation workable today, or accounting for how much the city's population, courthouse visitor volume, and caseloads have grown — and how much further the building has deteriorated — since the 2012 study and 2018 review that first examined renovation.

Security Risks the Current Building Cannot Resolve

- **There is no secure corridor or holding area for people in custody.** Today, individuals in custody are moved through non-public staff areas and held in rooms not designed for secure detention while awaiting their cases — placing them in close quarters with judicial chambers, court staff, and attorneys. The route used to bring people in custody into the building is shared with routine deliveries, vendor traffic, and other staff traffic, and is not fully isolated from general building access — an arrangement that Court Security and the Sheriff have identified as **not viable in the long term, given the risk of escape, violence, or hostage-taking.**
- There have been at least two documented inmate escapes from the Municipal Court Building due to the lack of secure inmate transportation and holding.
- This is not a hypothetical concern: the County's own construction projects have taken the secure sallyport and the connecting tunnel to the Court's holding cells out of service for the next several years. In their place, the Court has relied on an interim transport-and-holding arrangement that Court Security and the Sheriff have both characterized as falling short of a true secure sallyport. This was accepted as a temporary measure on the assumption that the Court would soon relocate to a new building. With that relocation now canceled, the arrangement has no clear end date and no long-term security solution in view.
- Fire and life-safety equipment is aging past its design life: the building's fire alarm panel has a 15-year design life, but was installed in 2004, and its 200 smoke detector heads are obsolete and are sourced through secondhand marketplace purchases when they fail.
- Security screening equipment is straining under record volume: the X-ray scanners were installed in 2016 and now screen more than 517,000 people annually, pushing the equipment's frame, generator, and detector components toward or past their typical service life. This equipment is expensive to replace, and that replacement has been deferred for years on the assumption that it would simply be provided new in the relocated courthouse.
- There is no secure judicial parking, requiring supplemental security staffing as judges arrive and leave the courthouse — a gap that has already led to one judge being surveilled and followed from their vehicle into the courthouse by a stalker, and another being stalked and threatened, along with other public officials, by an individual now in federal custody as a result of those crimes. Renovation, as currently discussed, would not add secure parking.
- Threats against judicial officers are a recognized, ongoing, and increasing risk nationwide, one that the Ohio Supreme Court and the National Center for State Courts have identified as a priority security concern. Municipal Court judges received 5 credible threats and reported 4

additional concerns to law enforcement in 2025. So far in 2026, 3 threats have been received — each serious enough to require a routine officer escort.

- Staffing the dock entrance, which serves both 375 South High Street and the adjacent county building, has created a gap in emergency response coverage. In 2025, Security staff responded to 34 medical emergencies and 40 duress calls; in the first seven months of this year alone, they have already responded to 33 medical emergencies and 36 duress calls. To address this gap, Security implemented a workaround — assigning a dedicated dock officer — but this has strained existing staffing levels and is now intended to become a permanent post.

A Building in Need of Complete System Replacement — Not Repair

- **Elevators, plumbing, electric, HVAC, security infrastructure, and technology systems throughout the building require full replacement, not incremental repair.**
- The Court has closed on multiple occasions due to flooding, including a multi-day closure in 2019.
- Despite the ADA's passage in 1990, the building still lacks compliant access: none of the Court's 26 courtrooms and facility restrooms allow unassisted entry. People with mobility issues who cannot navigate the Court's restrooms must travel to a nearby Franklin County building to find a compliant restroom. There is also no direct handicap vehicle parking near the courthouse; visitors with disabilities must travel up an elevated street a block away to reach the building.
- Numerous holes in interior walls throughout the building and most egregiously, the cracks in the plumbing in the eastside public restrooms, allowing gray water to leak into the building and pests into all Court areas, public and private.
- Elevator reliability has been a documented, years-long problem: internal Court correspondence from 2017 records that reliability “has been very problematic in this building for years,” citing individual elevators down for multiple days awaiting parts, failing call buttons, and cars stopping at random floors or refusing to move. When the high-rise elevators go down, floors 10 through 16 — where Judicial and Magistrates courtrooms are located — become accessible only by stairwell; the building's private elevators can't fill the gap because they sit in a secure area that doubles as a transport route for people in custody. **The Court typically has more than 4,000 people entering the building each day.**
- The problem remains live today, not just historical: Security fields service calls for elevator entrapments or other malfunctions almost weekly. The elevators' motors and pit equipment date to the building's 1979 construction — well past the typical 20-year design life for this equipment — and a 2017 modernization project did not replace them. The building also runs its elevators at 1,000 feet per minute, faster than the standard 800, to handle passenger volume; that extra speed further shortens service life, and replacement parts require custom, time-consuming fabrication.

- A separate two-year review of the building's elevator maintenance and entrapment records, covering 2024 through 2026, reached the same conclusion independently:
 - **Just last week, the Court's Security Director and an officer were entrapped for two hours. There are 55 documented entrapment incidents that affected at least 110 individuals** fleet-wide in this 2.5-year period.
 - Elevator 10 alone accounted for 12 incidents and 26 known trapped passengers — the highest of any car in the building. Elevator 8 was separately identified as “one of the least reliable elevators in the system.”
 - Door systems and brake components account for the overwhelming majority of repairs across the fleet.
 - Many service calls are resolved only through a temporary reset rather than a fix to the underlying cause — repairs the review specifically cautions “should not be considered permanent corrective actions.”
 - Absent significant capital investment, the elevators can be expected to remain serviceable for approximately five more years, but extending reliable operation toward a ten-year horizon is uncertain without modernization or replacement — independently corroborating Security's own estimate of 7–8 years of remaining useful life.

Documented elevator entrapment incidents by car, 2024–2026

Elevator Cab Number	Entrapment Incidents	Known Persons Entrapped
10	12 (highest in the building)	26 (+3 unknown)
1	11	15
4	8	20
9	7	21 (+1 unknown)
3	4	7
6	4	11
8	4	5
2	2	1 (+1 unknown)
7	2	2
5	1	1

- Jurors and staff wash coffee pots, cups, and lunch containers in restroom sinks due to a lack of adequate break-area facilities.
- Plumbing fixtures and windows throughout the building leak repeatedly, and the building has experienced multiple burst-pipe incidents.
- Electrical wiring has smoked in service, including an incident on the 16th floor that caused a burning odor and disrupted operations.

A Court That Has Outgrown a 1979 Design

- **In 2025 alone, the Court processed 154,339 total cases** across its General and Environmental Divisions — including 23,223 criminal cases, 53,120 traffic cases, 66,647 civil and small-claims matters, 8,537 speed-enforcement cases, and 2,812 sealings and expungements. Behind each of those cases are real people — plaintiffs, defendants, victims, witnesses, and family members — who deserve a courthouse whose condition reflects the seriousness and dignity of the work conducted inside it.
- Since the courthouse opened in 1979, the Court has added an Environmental Division handling code violations, derelict and nuisance buildings, building-health violations, illegal after-hours clubs, animal abuse and neglect, illegal dumping, and related offenses.
- The Court has added five Specialized Dockets addressing drug and alcohol addiction, mental health diagnoses, military veterans, and survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking, along with programming that holds domestic-violence offenders accountable and works to reduce recidivism.
- A Self-Help Center now assists self-represented litigants in landlord-tenant disputes, sealing and expungement of records, small claims, and contract matters; it had 33,211 visitors in 2025.
- Evictions continue to be one of the Court's highest civil caseloads, with 24,734 filings in 2025, and the Court's community partnerships in this area — which trace back to COVID-19-era housing instability — have since grown beyond mediation to connect litigants with food assistance, job-readiness resources, and housing alternatives. Legal Aid staffs the eviction courtroom's front conference rooms directly, providing on-the-spot legal assistance to the many tenants who show up unprepared and unrepresented.
- The MARCH Program is an on-site resource center connecting Franklin County residents — both justice-involved individuals and members of the public — with basic needs assessments and services aimed at preventing entry into the justice system or homelessness. In 2025, the program served 2,227 visitors, made 714 treatment referrals, completed 359 onsite assessments with Alvis, connected 719 visitors with Job and Family Services, provided 62 vocational services, and registered 79 new safety station users.
- An on-site drug lab, operating seven days a week, turns around results fast enough for the Court to act on a relapsing defendant right away — rather than waiting days on an outside lab, by which point the moment for intervention has often passed.
- In October 2024, the Court's Department of Pretrial and Probation Services launched an in-house Batterer Intervention Program (BIP) for individuals on community control in domestic-violence cases. The program is aimed specifically at the perpetrators of domestic violence, with the goal of reducing an already alarmingly high number of domestic violence incidents occurring throughout the city. **Columbus Public Health has reported 5,261 domestic violence victims with a reported injury to Columbus Police in a single year.** Sessions are free for participants and co-facilitated by male and female staff at the courthouse, with program

length and curriculum set by each participant's assessed risk of reoffending, ranging from an eight-week track for those at low risk to a minimum of forty weeks for those at high or extremely high risk. The program's risk-based structure, requiring a minimum 40-week course of treatment for participants classified at the highest risk of reoffending, reflects the severity of the domestic-violence offenses the Court is confronting. By early 2026, 177 defendants were enrolled, with additional groups being added to meet demand. ([Columbus Public Health, Violence Data Brief](#), Feb. 2023.)

- The Community Clean-Up Crew offers eligible individuals a sentencing alternative that pairs accountability with hands-on community service, and now partners with 20 community organizations across Franklin County on roadway, greenway, and neighborhood clean-up projects. In 2025, the Crew completed 89 clean-ups with 18 community partners, collecting more than 2,400 bags of trash, 1,400 miscellaneous items, and nearly 12 tons of yard waste, while recycling 926 tires and properly disposing of 127 hazardous items. Through the first half of 2026, the Crew has already completed 52 clean-ups, with volume expected to climb further as seasonal work increases.
- The building's 1979 design predates the Americans with Disabilities Act by more than a decade, and as detailed above, has never been retrofitted to bring it into compliance.

What the Court Actually Requested

The Court has already given up substantial workspace of its own to help control the new project's cost. At the outset, the City planned a new building almost identical in square footage to the current courthouse, despite that building's well-documented space constraints. As construction costs rose, the City removed an entire floor and continued reducing the building's footprint and removed the City Attorney's offices from the design entirely. Despite only asking for the facility to be built to fill the court's growing needs, the Court gave up:

- All twenty-six (26) judicial and magistrate robing rooms, used for secure meeting space for judges and attorneys, as well as office space used by judges before and after serving on the bench.
- The Duty Room and three staff work areas. The Duty Room is where law enforcement seeks search-warrant approval, magistrates' rulings are appealed, wedding ceremonies are performed, and other judicial functions are held on a weekly rotation among General Division judges; going forward, anyone needing the Duty Judge will report directly to that judge's courtroom.
- Private offices for ninety-seven (97) Court staff — including 66 in Probation, plus staff in Court Administration, Court Reporters, the Assignment Office, Court Services Bailiffs, Interpreters, and the Environmental Division — would be replaced with open, "bullpen"-style seating. Probation, the largest group affected, would lose dedicated client-meeting space entirely, relying instead on a shared, scheduled "hoteling" system to book interview rooms for

appointments — more than 400 of which occur on some weekdays. That figure of 97 does not include the Clerk of Courts' own staff, who separately gave up private offices for workstations.

- Dedicated paper-filing space, as the Clerk of Courts moves to a paperless case-management system for space and cost savings. This shift requires the Clerk and the Court to migrate to an entirely new case management system — an enormous undertaking for any large court. The Court is not required to operate in a paperless environment; this is a concession made by the Court and the Clerk in response to a City mandate that the new court facility contain no file rooms.

Set against these concessions, only three items reflect genuine new scope the Court requested — each a matter of operational necessity, not added convenience:

- Secure inmate sallyport, holding, and transport, which do not exist in the current building, require roughly the same amount of space regardless of the building's overall size. Even at the outset, when the new building was sized to match the current courthouse, adding this previously nonexistent space meant something else had to give; the subsequent removal of an entire floor and further reductions in footprint only deepened that shortfall. The Court and Clerk are absorbing it by giving up their own staff office space, and the City Attorney was completely removed from the building.
- Space for caseload and program growth since the project was first scoped in 2018, including expanded drug and alcohol treatment, required domestic-violence education, the Self-Help Center, the MARCH Program, the on-site drug lab, and eviction/small-claims mediation run with community partners. Environmental Division caseload growth is directly tied to the City's expanded code enforcement and abatement activities.
- Secure judicial parking — a basic security expectation that does not exist today, and one that renovation as proposed would not provide.

Adequate technology infrastructure is not a new scope, either — the current courthouse severely lacks it, and any building the Court occupies, old or new, would require it. The original space assessment itself was under-scoped from the start: the City relied on a National Center for State Courts (NCSC) study built around a remote-work model reflecting conditions shortly after COVID-19, when some Court operations were temporarily dispersed. The Court maintained throughout that it would not operate remotely in the long term, given its public-facing role, yet neither NCSC nor the City ever revised the space recommendations to reflect an on-site workforce. That gap, compounded by the City's own subsequent cost-cutting measures and the space reductions made to accommodate them, is what the Court has been left to absorb.

Is Renovating Two Buildings More Cost-Effective?

- The City's plan pairs the Municipal Court Building (375 South High Street) with the Karnes Building (410 South High Street) as “swing space.” Karnes was originally acquired for demolition and has already undergone asbestos abatement; its HVAC and other core building

systems are unlikely to be reusable, meaning it needs its own buildout for the Court's needs — including video-capable courtrooms, a probation operation handling 400-plus appointments some days, and a seven-day-a-week drug lab — plus a further renovation once the Court eventually vacates it.

- Splitting one court's operations across two secured buildings means duplicating sophisticated security infrastructure at each site — cameras, a second monitored control room, a larger screening area, added equipment, staffing, and utility costs — for years, not a one-time cost. It would also require transporting people in custody between 375 South High Street and the Karnes Building for hearings, appointments, and other court business split across the two sites, and replicating a secure inmate transport path — sallyport, holding, and transport corridor — at a second site, when the Court does not have a secure version of that path, even at its single current location today. Moving people in custody between two insecure facilities, rather than holding them at one, multiplies this risk rather than resolving it. The City has cited the renovation plan's greater combined square footage as a benefit — roughly 320,000 square feet and 25-plus courtrooms across both buildings, versus 250,000 square feet and 24 courtrooms in the new building. That comparison counts raw space without accounting for how it is delivered, or for the cost and public confusion of requiring people to travel between two locations for hearings, probation appointments, court-ordered drug testing, and paying fines, court costs, or bonds.
- The City's 320,000 square-foot figure also does not appear to account for the City Attorney's Office, whose approximately 101 employees are slated to remain at 375 South High Street rather than relocate into the new courthouse. If that office's footprint stays the same, its presence means a portion of the combined 320,000 square feet is already spoken for — space the raw total does not subtract out. That overstates how much of the building is genuinely available for the Court's own stated needs: secure corridors, holding areas, and video-capable courtrooms.

Renovating an Occupied Courthouse Has Been Tried — and Rejected — Before

This is not the first time the City has proposed renovating this building, nor the first time it has acknowledged the building's deteriorating condition. In 2012, the City proposed a decade-long, **\$90 million** phased renovation, acknowledging that “there has been nothing done in terms of significant upgrades” since the building opened in 1979 — and noting that a new elevator shaft would need to be cut through the building's center to allow secure prisoner transport, the same core security problem the Court still raises today. That approach was abandoned in 2018 in favor of new construction. The City has not explained what has changed to make phased renovation workable now.

Maintaining operations at the state's highest-volume urban court through a total building renovation is unreasonable and dismissive of the seriousness of the proceedings this Court oversees. Systems throughout the building — elevators, plumbing, HVAC, security infrastructure, and technology —

require complete replacement, making it impossible to renovate two or three floors at a time while the Court remains open for business, as proposed.

The New Courthouse Was Already Funded

- 2019 multi-issue \$1 billion bond package approved by voters: \$130 million earmarked for this project.
- 2024 capital budget: an additional \$150 million designated (\$139,804,283 actual).
- 2025 multi-issue \$1.9 billion bond package approved by the voters: a further \$100 million earmarked.
- Combined: **\$370 million against the City's announced final cost for a new courthouse of \$335 million** — on these figures, the project remained fully funded, and cancellation reflects a choice about redirecting already-committed resources rather than a genuine funding gap.
- Industry estimates put construction-cost inflation at roughly 40 percent since 2020 — a significant, if not sole, driver of the increases.

The Renovation Cost Estimate Comparison

The City's Department of Finance has published the following project comparison:

	New Construction	Renovation
Project scope	Existing courthouse returned to the County; Karnes Building demolished; new courthouse built on Dorian Commons	Existing courthouse renovated; Karnes Building renovated; Dorian Commons returned to greenspace
2018 cost estimate	\$200 million	N/A
2026 cost estimate	\$335 million	\$260 million (estimate)
Net usable square footage	250,000 sq. ft.	320,000+ sq. ft.
Courtrooms	24	25+
Timing	Grand opening, spring 2030	Rolling openings, summer 2034 through late 2035
2026 capital budget impact	\$0 available for new projects	\$75+ million available for new projects

Now the same community bears the concrete side of this trade-off directly: a courthouse whose documented deficiencies remain unresolved for years beyond the planned timeline, and a building whose renovation will now proceed in phases while continuous, high-volume court operations continue.

The renovation estimate also invites a direct historical comparison. In 2012, the City estimated that a decade-long, phased renovation of the existing courthouse alone — with no changes to the Karnes Building — would cost \$90 million. Fourteen years later, the City now estimates that \$260 million

will cover not just that same renovation but also a full renovation of the Karnes Building. By the City's own account, construction costs have risen roughly 40 percent since 2020 alone, but even accounting for that inflation, the estimate has nearly tripled, while the scope has expanded to include a second building. The Court has not been shown the underlying basis for the \$260 million figure and believes a clear explanation of how it compares to the far narrower renovation scope estimated a decade and a half ago is deserved.

What's at Stake for the Community

- This is the largest municipal court in the state and, by a wide margin, the City's most-visited building — **517,000 visitors last year alone.**
- Plaintiffs, tenants, jurors, crime victims, people navigating mental-health or substance-use needs, and other litigants — many without legal representation — deserve a well-designed, ADA accessible, and convenient courthouse. **They should not be asked to wait another six to eight years for one.**

The Mayor has said that renovating the existing Municipal Court building, together with the Karnes Building — with rolling openings **not completed until summer 2034 through late 2035** — would provide a better solution for the Court. **The Court strongly disagrees.**

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