

A Grand Re-Opening

1891 courthouse, 'face of Pinal County,' has been fully modernized

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FLORENCE — A facelift 12 months in the making was finally unveiled Wednesday in Florence.

The 1891 Pinal County courthouse, fully restored and modernized, was opened to the public with much pomp and circumstance.

Besides being the home for the new five-member Pinal County Board of Supervisors and county staff, including the clerk of the board, the budget department, internal audit and communications, the courthouse has more than functional significance.

“This building is, in fact, the face of Pinal County,” board Chairman David Snider said to a throng of about 100 people gathered on the courthouse grounds on a chilly afternoon.

Snider praised the expediency of the restoration, which began in earnest just 12 months prior. Despite major challenges involved in bringing a building 121 years old back to life and into the 21st century — including ridding the building of asbestos and aluminum wiring — it was ready to go slightly ahead of schedule.

“From a year ago to today, when you go inside, you will see that they have accomplished miracles,” Snider said. “It is truly awesome ... it will take your breath away.”

Supervisor Pete Rios talked about the building’s history, and how the courthouse used to include the Sheriff’s Office and the jail on the main level, in addition to the courtroom on the second floor. The main floor now includes the meeting room where all the board’s meetings will be held; it’s the same room that was once the jail. Interior windows at the top of the walls on the left and right side of the room still have the iron bars from the old jail, as a nod to history.

The jail held some famous criminals going way back, including Eva Dugan, who was convicted of murder and later hanged on the building’s second floor. She is still the only female prisoner ever executed in Arizona. Dugan was hanged in the room that is now the office of District 3 supervisor-elect Steve Miller, and it was the same room where all executions took place.

Rios made sure to poke some fun at his incoming colleague for some potential visitors he may have.

“The only thing I ask is don’t spook those spirits across the hall to my office; keep them out of there,” he said.

Supervisor Clark Smithson, who replaced Bryan Martyn after Martyn resigned to become director of Arizona State Parks in May, said of the courthouse as he turned to point to it, “They don’t make them like that any more.”

He was referencing one of the reasons why he thought it was a better idea to restore the old courthouse than to build a new one. Rios gave credit to County Manager Fritz Behring for suggesting the restoration as an alternative to constructing a new facility.

The second floor of the courthouse includes the offices for the five supervisors, budget department and meeting rooms. The main room, which used to be the courtroom, is now a place where special events and community gatherings will be held. It’s also likely the renovated courtroom, which still has the judge’s bench on the back wall, will host many weddings.

Lasting community connection

The historic Pinal County courthouse in Florence was first completed in 1891 but has undergone a major makeover heading into its first official use in several years. More than \$6 million went into the comprehensive restoration.

The building has a rich history in Pinal County, with its initial completion coming 21 years before Arizona achieved statehood. The courthouse was, and arguably still is, the most recognizable building in the county.

Pinal resident Ernie Feliz, who was involved in the restoration as the county grants coordinator, has fond memories of the building, dating back to when he first entered it at age 5. He recalled being drawn to the main staircase; its grandiosity is one of the courthouse’s most defining features.

“For a little kid, that was something that was really fabulous, and I wanted to climb up and down that staircase,” he said. “Of course my mom wouldn’t let me, and I don’t think I ever got a chance to climb up and down the staircase until I was an adult.”

Feliz eventually got many opportunities to not only walk the staircase, but to venture into all corners of the building and experience all its intricate details.

In July of 1981, Feliz visited the courthouse as a reporter for the Casa Grande Dispatch to get a story and take some photos. At the time, he didn't know exactly what he was in for on his tour.

The county public works department escorted him into the attic, inside its clock tower, and eventually, onto a scaffolding outside the clock tower.

"I went out the window and straight up these three stories of scaffolding in the middle of the summer," he said.

Feliz said construction workers had a bit of fun with him by bouncing around on the scaffolding, while Feliz joked he was "hanging on for dear life" while trying to take photos.

The clock facings on the tower aren't functional. When the building was first completed, there wasn't enough money to install working clocks. Instead, clock facings made of pressed metal were installed on each side of the tower, with the hands placed at 11:44.

During a tour of the building in April, County Manager Fritz Behring said the prevailing opinion as to why the time was set at 11:44 is because it was somewhat of an inside joke among workers that it was always "about time for lunch."

For some area residents, and especially those whose families have lived in the county for generations, the courthouse is much more than a landmark.

Feliz's family has lived in Florence since the 1870s, and he called himself a "fourth-generation native."

"The courthouse stands out to me as a point of pride for people who live in Florence," Feliz said.

Florence is largely known as a prison town because it has several federal and state prisons, despite its relatively small size — about 25,000 population — and it's also home to the Pinal County Jail.

Feliz said the courthouse is a response residents can give to people who ask about Florence, "What else is there but prisons?"