

As courthouse crumbles, Pinal scrambles to save it

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The 115-year-old Pinal County Courthouse is showing its age and facing a questionable future. Brick walls are disintegrating. Crews drag children's wading pools into second-floor courtrooms to catch the water that leaks through the roof during heavy rains.

"No one is saying the building is going to fall down tomorrow, but we know that's an eventuality unless we fix some things," said Ernie Feliz, Pinal County's grants coordinator. "It's been a building that's captured the hearts and imaginations of people in Florence and the county."

Pinal's is one of the oldest courthouses in Arizona. It was the state's oldest active courthouse until late 2005, when the Treasurer's Office and Assessor's Office moved to a new building.

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The county believes it will take about \$4 million to realize its dream of restoring the courthouse and turning it into a museum, visitor's center and conference center.

About \$270,000 worth of work has shored up the 24,000-square-foot clock tower to keep it from tipping over.

Now, \$750,000 is needed to repair a bowed section of the roof that's causing rainwater to seep into the building, Feliz said. A mix of federal, state and county grants will cover about \$500,000 of that work.

Additional funds are needed for general restoration throughout the courthouse and repair of the disintegrating masonry underneath some first-floor windows.

If the repairs aren't made, especially those to the roof, Feliz said, the building will continue to disintegrate and will have to be demolished. To help save the historic building, the county has applied for a \$100,000 State Historic Preservation Fund grant, but it's also dipping into an untapped reserve: the good hearts of local residents.

Residents can buy one of the bricks set in the walkways leading to the courthouse for \$50 and have their names or a message carved into it. Eighty bricks out of about 3,000 have been sponsored so far, raising about \$4,000, Feliz said.

Rhoda Anderson, 83, worked in a state civil defense office at the courthouse for six years in the 1960s and always appreciated its Victorian architecture dating from 1891.

"I'm very attached to that old courthouse," the Coolidge resident said. "I'm one of those people who thinks if we don't keep our past, we don't know where we are in our present."

Pinal County's courthouse is vital to the historic identity of the town and county, Florence town historian John Swearingen said.

It is also a key component of the town's effort to revitalize its historic downtown.

"It's the most historic structure the county owns, and it's the most beautiful building owned by the county," Swearingen said. "It's been a part of the life of the town and the county."

The courthouse is actually Pinal County's second. The first was built in 1878, according to State Historic Preservation Office historian William Collins. It was replaced by the larger brick courthouse and later turned into a state park.



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Ernie Feliz, Pinal County's grants coordinator, surveys the damage of an exterior wall of the Pinal County Courthouse in Florence. Feliz is looking for ways to raise money needed to restore the 115-year-old building.