

High tech solution brings old Napa County courthouse records into view

By DAVID RYAN

Register Staff Writer

Friday, September 30, 2005 10:36 AM PDT

The paperless society has arrived at Napa's historic courthouse.

Inside a new viewing room next to the staircase, a click of a mouse will bring up old case files that would have taken 10 days to get out of storage, and there's no need to manage the heft of thick file folders.

"We didn't want the public to wait to view a file," said Georgine Larson, assistant court executive of Napa County courts. "A lot of people wait in lines to file documents, but a lot of people wait in line to view a document, just to hear someone say they will have to order it."

The project to upgrade access started in December 2003, when courthouse staff used BMI, a company out of Sacramento, to scan filings from old cases that have already been decided or dismissed by a judge. Last week they unveiled the electronic search system along with a new viewing room used exclusively for researching old cases.

"I've been here 30 years and the big constant problem is research and us being able to efficiently provide that to the public," Larson said. "We've been open a week now and every time I walk by that room I see someone in there."

Along with the new viewing room come new computers the public can use to search for cases.

Two are propped on a counter behind the stairs, two are in the viewing room and two are in the law library.

The new computers and the viewing room are part of the historic courthouse remodel, which has serenaded the denizens of the courthouse with hammering and drilling since it began last summer.

Steve Bouch, court executive officer, said the construction effort was designed to update electrical wiring and make the courthouse look like it is one building. The historic courthouse was built in 1878, the hall of records was built in 1918 and in the 1970s other parts of the building were added on. Bouch estimated construction would end in mid-November.

Bouch said the three section of the courthouse "will look like they were done at the same time."

Meanwhile, staff will be scanning more and more cases. So far they've scanned cases dating back to 1991.

"We're going back further than that, we're working backwards," Larson said, adding the courts still get requests for cases going back as far as the 1940s.

The court will also work forwards. Larson said clerks would eventually be given scanners to scan documents as they are filed at the courthouse.

Napa attorney Beverly Saxon Leonard thinks the new search system will make life easier for her paralegals, but it's so new no one in her office has had a chance to try it out yet.

"You can do it yourself, you don't need to bother the clerks," she said. "I think that's an excellent idea."

County courts in California have taken advantage of technological advances in different ways. In Solano and Santa Clara counties, descriptions of cases are available online, a suggestion Leonard said she made to Bouch.

So far, Napa's search system is only accessible through computers at the courthouse, but that could change in the years to come.

"Those are some issues that are being discussed with the court executive officer," Larson said.