

Cheshire County Officials Protest Proposed Keene Court Moves

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A Cheshire County commissioner has joined a growing number of local officials protesting the governor's plan to move Keene District Court to the Cheshire County Courthouse.

If Gov. John H. Lynch's plan becomes reality, the Superior Court, which is located in the county-owned courthouse, would have to find a new headquarters, because the facility is too small for both courts.

Superior Court would most likely be relocated to Jaffrey-Peterborough District Court, though all options are still on the table, according to state judicial branch spokeswoman Laura A. Kiernan.

The state would save about \$52,000 a year in rent it pays to the city for the space District Court occupies in the Keene City Hall building. Savings would also come from canceling per diem contracts for court security officers.

While the city stands to lose money on the deal, it would be a wash for the county, which receives \$399,000 a year in rent from the state for the Superior Court. The state would still pay the same amount of rent on the District Court if it goes to the courthouse, Kiernan said.

But the county and city would be burdened with additional costs associated with transporting prisoners, police officers, prosecutors and others who frequent Superior Court to Jaffrey, which is about a 40 minute drive from Keene, County Commission Chairman Stillman D. Rogers said. He called the proposal a catastrophe.

"I think all the people in Keene ought to be upset about it," he said. "It destroys the city's plans for keeping these vital operations downtown. Keene is smack dab in the middle of the county and it's a perfect location for the courts. This plan disadvantages every police department in the county. This is a deprivation of justice as far as I'm concerned."

Rogers, who worked for 23 years as clerk at Superior Court and retired in 2001, said at least 300 people visit the court each day.

"For those people to be serviced by Superior Court in Jaffrey, it would mean most of them would have to be traveling," he said. "It would increase the cost to litigants immensely. Lawyers who could stay in their offices before hearings would have to spend the entire day traveling to Jaffrey and waiting for court. It would also be a huge cost to the police department."

The plan also doesn't make sense because the county recently spent \$38.8 million to build a new jail in Keene so it would be closer to the courts, Rogers said.

City Manager John A. MacLean said he wants the District Court to stay put and will recommend that the lease be renewed when it expires in July, though the state will decide whether the court is relocated.

MacLean said city officials are working with the Cheshire County Legislative Delegation to understand the state's reasoning behind the consolidation plan.

Lynch stated the plan would save the state \$2 million, but the governor's spokesman, Colin Manning, was unable to break down the exact savings that would come from the Keene District Court consolidation.

"We need to understand, No. 1, 'What is the benefit of doing this?'" MacLean said. "I'm still trying to understand, fundamentally, how they get any significant savings from this."

Cheshire County Attorney Peter W. Heed also opposes the plan and has said that it would wreak havoc on the prosecutor's office if it remained in Keene and attorneys had to drive to Jaffrey for hearings.

Keene Police Chief Arthur Walker also said the plan would put his department at a disadvantage.

"You would be paying police officers to drive back and forth to Jaffrey, rather than doing police work," he said in a previous interview.

Rogers and other local officials said they would like to see Keene District Court and Cheshire County Superior Court housed in one large building.

The state has rejected a plan that would have temporarily relocated District Court to the former Latchis Theater building in downtown Keene.

Under the county's proposal, the state would pay half of the estimated \$6 million cost of renovating the dilapidated building and the county would pay the rest.

The county also offered to give the state the courthouse block between Court and Middle streets, which includes the courthouse building and its parking lot. The property is worth about \$12 million, Rogers said.

"The plan was for them to erect a new facility on that property that would accommodate Superior Court and District Court," he said. "When they moved District Court out of the Latchis building, we would use it as a county office space."

City officials also proposed housing District Court at the city government complex at 350 Marlboro St., but state judicial officials shot that idea down because they were concerned about having the court share a space with the Keene Police Department.

"For the last two years the county commissioners and city have tried to work with the state to find a solution for the District Court and the state has refused to undertake any action that would cost them a dime," Rogers said. "They expect the county and city to foot the bill for them, and it's absurd."

Sentinel staff writer Anika Clark contributed to this report.

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