



# Office of the Sheriff

*Howard County, Maryland*

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William J. McMahon  
*Sheriff*

## **Testimony to County Council on New Courthouse**

February 21, 2017

### **Chair Weinstein and members of the County Council:**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of you this evening in **SUPPORT of Council Bill 27** that will allow for the construction of a new Circuit Courthouse for Howard County.

One of the **primary responsibilities of the Howard County Sheriff's Office is the safety and security of those who come to the Courthouse.** This includes parties, witnesses, attorneys, judges and court support personnel, as well as the general public. The current Courthouse, despite its historical significance and charm, makes this task almost impossible to complete.

As you know, the Court house was **originally constructed in 1851, with major renovation's in the mid-1980s and again a decade ago.** Despite the changes made during those periods, the building is outdated and does not support the security measures needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

One of my first activities was to assess the safety and security environment of the building, the training our deputies receive and the overall readiness of County personnel to respond to an emergency there. I was pleased to find that our deputies have been involved in "active shooter" training for some time. I have worked with Chief Gardner's staff to ensure that the Police Department's SWAT team and other specialized personnel have exposure to the building and access to it for training. However, **the building itself does not lend itself to the environment of safety that we all want. Among the significant issues are:**



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- The configuration of **the front entrance poses significant challenges in properly screening employees and the public** coming to the Court house. Lines quickly form and the integrity of the screening process is easily compromised. As an example, two main stairways that are located just inside the entrance offer a quick path to bypass the deputies, the x-ray machine and the magnetometer, requiring us to often provide additional staffing there.
- **The exterior area of the Courthouse (Sally Port) used for prisoner arrival and departure is on a public street.** The street must be blocked during prisoner arrival/departure. The Sally Port is located in an extremely open location and **does not offer an acceptable level of concealment or cover in the event of a security breach. Neighbors who may be out taking a walk are interrupted** and have to be held up or diverted as suspects are escorted to and from the Court. Additionally, the actual Sally Port is very narrow and does not allow for access of transport vehicles.
- The Lock-Up area used **for prisoner detention and processing (juvenile and adult) is cramped and poorly designed.** Deputies are required to take extraordinary measures to maintain ample security while escorting prisoners to and from courtrooms. **In fact, court employees, including judges, must remain in their offices as we escort these incarcerated defendants to the courtrooms.**
- **Maintaining sight and sound separation, as required by Maryland and Federal law, for juvenile detainees is nearly impossible.** Once again, extraordinary measures must be exercised by deputies/security officers in order to maintain compliance and a safe custodial environment.



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- **Interview rooms for attorney/prisoner consultation do not provide an acceptable level of privacy.** Conversations can easily be heard from an adjacent hallway and the Lock-Up area.
- The outdated design of the courtrooms makes **it difficult for deputies to maintain a safe environment for the public, court employees, jurors and prisoners.** In custody defendants are often in close proximity to the general public and those attending court proceedings. The use of one courtroom is restricted to only cases involving non-in-custody defendants. Several courtrooms are restricted in the case of serious criminal jury trials.
- **Parking for the public, court employees and Sheriff's Office deputies is limited.** Designated parking spaces for **individuals with disabilities** in close proximity to the Courthouse are frequently full requiring those individuals to park in general parking. The Courthouse is very inconvenient and challenging to access, particularly during inclement weather, for individuals with disabilities.
- **Parking for judges** is not consistent with judiciary safety standards and is not enclosed.
- The current Courthouse office **area designated for Sheriff's Office operations is limited.** HCSO personnel who routinely are required to be present at the Courthouse (Domestic Violence, Warrant/Fugitive, Landlord/Tenant, and Administrative Support) do not have offices at the Circuit Courthouse. **HCSO efficiency would be significantly improved if these units could be more centralized to Courthouse operations.**
- **The age and construction materials of the building make alterations difficult, if not impossible.** Thick granite walls are commonly found throughout the building. Even a seemingly simple addition of a camera



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or an alarm presents significant challenges and can be costly and time consuming.

- At least two **security assessment reports** have been done on the building by the non-profit ***National Center for State Courts*** over the last ten years. While improvements have been made based on the recommendations in those reports, some **significant issues remain. These can be easily addressed in the design and building of a new Courthouse.**

In conclusion, there is a very real and well documented need for a new Courthouse. As the Sheriff, I am concerned about our ability to maintain the level of safety and security required in today's society. I urge you to vote in favor of this resolution and ultimate construction of a new Courthouse.