

Future Use of the Former Macon County Courthouse

Prepared for: Macon County Commission
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Summary

This proposal for the former Macon County Courthouse envisions its transformation into a vibrant history center, a space dedicated to preserving and celebrating the county's rich historical heritage. The building would house a combination of the local archives, historical society, and a newly established museum. By consolidating these elements into one central location, the project aims to create a dynamic venue where both residents and visitors can come together to learn about, study, and engage with the history of the region. The history center would serve as a hub for historical research, offering resources to those interested in local genealogy, regional history, and cultural preservation.

In addition to being a center for historical study and research, the former courthouse would be a gathering place for the community. It would host a variety of events such as fundraisers, charity auctions, and cultural activities, all designed to raise money for the ongoing upkeep and expansion of the project. These events could include lectures, historical reenactments, or exhibits that offer interactive experiences, ensuring the building becomes an integral part of the local social and cultural fabric.

The courthouse's central location makes it an ideal venue for such an initiative, as it would attract both residents and tourists seeking to connect with the county's history. By offering a centralized space, the history center could inspire a deeper appreciation of the area's past, while also fostering a sense of pride and identity among the community. The proposal envisions a space where history is not only preserved but also actively celebrated and shared, ensuring that future generations continue to engage with the rich legacy of Macon County.

Section 1: Seek Registration on the National Register of Historic Places

The first step of this proposal would include seeking registration on the National Register of Historic Places for the building. After speaking with the Tennessee Historical Commission, they are willing to evaluate the property for potential qualification and help with the process of registration if the former courthouse is found to qualify for this designation. The application process, outlined below, would be the starting point of this entire proposal. Seeking registration would allow the County to apply for grants from the Historic Preservation Fund, a fund allocated by the federal government from oil field leases (not taxes), that is given to state Historical Commissions to grant to local organizations, government entities, and individuals to provide up to 60% of funding for renovation and restoration projects. It would be ideal for this process to be initiated and completed to see if we could achieve NRHP status to open the county up to additional funding and grant eligibility for this project.

The Registration Process

The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) is the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation. Registering a historic building on the National Register is an important step in recognizing its historical, architectural, or cultural significance. After speaking with the Tennessee Historical Commission (THC), they are willing to help in the evaluation of the property by applying for status with the THC to have them help determine eligibility and to help with the application process if eligibility is met. Here's a step-by-step guide for the process:

1. Research and Eligibility Assessment

- **Preliminary Research:** The first step is to conduct research to determine if the building meets the National Register's criteria for significance, which can include architectural style, historical events, or cultural importance. This can be done through consulting local historians, architects, or preservation specialists.
- **Eligibility Criteria:** The building must be **at least 50 years old** and meet one of the following:
 - Association with significant historical events or persons.
 - Distinctive architectural style or craftsmanship.
 - Potential to yield important information in prehistory or history.
 - **Significant in relation to the local or national cultural heritage.**

2. Prepare the Nomination

- **Gather Documentation:** Compile detailed information about the building, including:
 - A history of the property, including its date of construction and significant changes.
 - Architectural description with photographs, plans, and drawings.

- A statement of significance explaining why the building is historically or architecturally important.
- **Nomination Form (NPS Form 10-900):** Complete the official National Register nomination form. The form requires comprehensive information, including a physical description, historical background, and justification for the building's significance. It should also include maps and photographs of the property.

3. State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) Review

- **Submit the Nomination:** Once the nomination form is complete, submit it to your State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The SHPO is responsible for reviewing and evaluating the nomination against the National Register criteria.
- **SHPO's Role:** The SHPO will assess the building's eligibility, ensure the nomination is complete, and may request additional information. If the SHPO supports the nomination, it will forward it to the National Park Service (NPS) for final review.

4. Public Review

- **Public Notice:** Before forwarding the nomination to the National Park Service, the SHPO may be required to notify the public and other interested parties. This can include community members, local governments, and organizations who may want to provide comments or objections.
- **Public Comments:** The public is encouraged to submit feedback. If there are objections, these must be resolved before proceeding to the next step.

5. National Park Service Review

- **Evaluation by the NPS:** After being nominated, the National Park Service (NPS) reviews the documentation to ensure that the property meets the National Register criteria. The NPS consults with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and makes a final determination.
- **Review Board Meeting:** The NPS consults with the National Register Review Board, a panel of experts who make recommendations for listing properties. If the building is deemed eligible, the board will recommend the property for inclusion on the National Register.

6. Listing Decision

- **Final Determination:** The NPS, based on the Review Board's recommendations, makes the final decision on whether to list the building on the National Register of Historic Places. This decision is typically made within a few months.
- **Notification:** If the property is approved, the NPS will notify the SHPO, the property owner, and other interested parties. The property is then officially added to the National Register.

7. Post-Listing Activities

- **Preservation Benefits:** Once listed, the property is eligible for various preservation incentives, including federal tax credits, grants, and protection from federal projects that may negatively affect the property.
- **Ongoing Maintenance:** While National Register listing does not impose restrictions on how the property is used or modified, it does provide recognition and support for preservation efforts. Property owners are encouraged to follow best practices for maintaining the building's historic integrity.
- **Public Recognition:** The building is publicly recognized as an important piece of the nation's history, and its listing is often celebrated with a plaque or marker.

This process helps ensure that historic buildings are properly recognized and preserved for future generations while fostering a greater understanding of the nation's diverse cultural and architectural heritage.

ADA Compliance Note

The discussion around ADA compliance on access to the second floor could also be affected by this designation. There are instances where ADA exceptions have been granted to properties listed on the National Register where making access to the second floor would significantly "alter or destroy the building's historical character". The option to remedy the ADA compliance was an elevator. However, modifying the building to house an elevator would significantly alter its structure; therefore, its historical character. Applying for an exception could be a possibility if the building were granted NRHP status.

Section 2: Establish the Historic Courthouse and Museum

To preserve and reimagine the former courthouse, it is proposed that the former courthouse be officially named the *Macon County Historic Courthouse and Museum*. This would also appropriate the establishment of a museum to be housed at the former county courthouse. This designation and reimagining of the former courthouse would revitalize the Lafayette Square and put historic preservation and research right at the heart of Macon County.

There are two options presented herein for the museum. One, the preferred option, could be used if the NRHP designation was gained and an ADA exception was granted. If this designation and exception could not be granted, then we would have to modify the plans herein. Therefore, submitted below are two different options based on those two scenarios.

Option 1: Preferred Option

Option one would see the museum placed into the upstairs meeting room and office spaces. The second floor of the Historic Courthouse would become the official museum space. Inside the meeting room and offices, display cases, artifacts, documents, and pictures would line the floors and walls and create a real sense of pride and educational purpose. However, it would be ideal if the meeting room was mostly left as is present and not too much added in this space. This would allow the meeting space to be left to still house historic educational seminars, meetings, and conferences. This space as a “rental” to historic organizations for these purposes could generate income for the upkeep and operations of the property.

Option 2: Secondary Option

If the second floor of the historic courthouse could not be granted an exception and used for public use, this would be the ideal solution. The second floor would be granted as storage space with no public access, therefore removing the need to meet ADA compliance. This would mean that the first-floor spaces would have to be used slightly different to fit the museum space there in conjunction with the other proposed uses.

This second option would see the museum housed in one of the four corner offices of the first floor and would also propose installing display cases, pictures, and document holders to the walls of the first-floor hallways. This would allow the purpose of the museum to move forward, while being confined to a smaller space. This option would also include that instead of being permanent displays, as in option one, the museum would be a “living museum” that would change out displays periodically to different times, periods, or topics in Macon County history.

Fundraising

The museum would seek donations of artifacts, documents, and photographs from the community to be displayed herein. Some local non-profit historic organizations have in their possession many artifacts relevant to our history and might be willing to loan these to be displayed at the museum. The idea would be for local historic preservation non-profits to seek business sponsorships for displays. These sponsorships would provide funds for purchasing display cases to hold these artifacts. The business that sponsored the display could have their logo placed on a small sign affixed to the outside of the case. Additionally, the Macon County Historical Society and Macon County History Preservation Project could hold community fundraising events at the historic courthouse and those proceeds go toward displays, upkeep and/or expenses.

Museum Fees

If the NRHP designation and ADA exception were granted, the museum, housed on the second floor, could boast a modest “entrance fee” (not to exceed \$10) that would be placed in the upkeep/expense fund for the building. However, if the designation and exception were not granted, the museum being housed on the first floor would eliminate the feasibility of this “entrance fee” to be imposed.

Exception: If the museum fee were put in place, an exception should be granted for educational use. This would create an exception whereas if school field trips were planned to the museum, the entrance fee would not be enforced to school-age children, faculty, and staff for this purpose. There could also be a reduced fee for Macon County residents and even potentially yearly passes available at \$50 per family (max of 5).

Museum Upkeep

The upkeep of the museum – cleaning, organizing, setting up displays, etc. – would ideally be a community project completed by volunteers through local historic preservation organizations. Community “workdays” could be organized where volunteers would be accepted to complete certain upkeep projects.

Section 3: Relocate Macon County Archives and Historical Society

With the creation of the *Macon County Historic Courthouse and Museum*, under this proposal, as the center of historic preservation in Macon County, it would seem appropriate to propose that the commission consider the relocation of the Macon County Archives and the Macon County Historical Society (if they wish to do so) to the new historic courthouse.

Macon County Archives

With the Macon County Archives, currently located on Sycamore Street, moving to the historic courthouse, this would make archival exploration and research quicker and more efficient being centrally located. This move would expand on the potential of the historic courthouse becoming the “historic center” of preservation and research. It would also make research efforts, by visitors and community members, easier having these resources all in one location.

Macon County Historical Society

The Macon County Historical Society is a local non-profit that does a tremendous amount of historic preservation and data collection for the community. Just as with the county archives, relocating the historical society to the new historic courthouse would further the mission to make history more easily accessible to the community in one location. This move would also allow the Historical Society to help maintain the county museum as described in the previous section. This move would need to pass a vote by the members of the Historical Society.

Current Buildings

With these two moves, if enacted, we begin to question what could happen with the other two buildings owned by Macon County that are currently occupied by these two entities. The recommendation in this proposal would be to sell these current buildings to pay for upkeep on the historic courthouse. The county is already spending money on upkeep and expenses on housing these historic entities in those buildings. With the removal of the burden of these two buildings, moving those funds to pay for the new historic courthouse upkeep would potentially not require additional taxpayer funds. Additionally, the proceeds from the sale of those buildings could also be put into an account for the upkeep of the historic courthouse or other preservation efforts. (See section 4)

Building 1: 907 Sycamore Street

This proposal to the County Commission would suggest for the county to seek selling the building at 907 Sycamore Street. This building is in decent shape and could serve a private business well.

Building 2: 111 East Locust Street

The building at 111 E Locust Street brings a slightly more complex challenge. At present time, the building owned solely by Macon County, houses two entities. It currently houses the Macon County Historical Society and the UT Extension Office for the county. There could be two options to consider here. A) Sell the building and seek relocation of the UT Extension Office, or B) maintain ownership of the property and rent out the portion that the historical society occupies currently.

Section 4: Establish a Historic Preservation Fund

Fund Income

Establishing a Historic Preservation Fund in Macon County would provide a sustainable financial mechanism for maintaining and preserving the county's rich historical landmarks, particularly the historic courthouse. The fund could be supported by multiple revenue sources, including proceeds from museum entrance fees, the sale of current buildings that are no longer of historical significance, fundraising events, and private donations. Museum visitors could contribute through admission fees, which would directly support the preservation efforts of the county's heritage. This would not only enhance public awareness of local history but also ensure the continuation of crucial upkeep for the courthouse and other historical sites.

Fund Usage

In addition to maintaining the courthouse, the fund could support efforts to identify and protect other historically significant buildings and sites within Macon County. By allocating grants or providing financial assistance to local preservation organizations, the fund could incentivize the preservation of other historic properties that may be at risk of neglect or demolition. This could help foster a deeper sense of pride and connection to the community's history while stimulating local tourism and economic development. Ultimately, a Historic Preservation Fund would not only protect the physical fabric of Macon County's history but also ensure that future generations can continue to appreciate the stories and legacy that shape their identity.

Fund Management

There is only one feasible solution for managing of the proposed Historic Preservation Fund (HPF). This fund ideally should be managed by the county commission. Where preservation organizations would bring needs, applications for grants, and proposed plans for projects to be completed, to the county commission for its consideration and approval. This would be a government-owned fund, so nothing could come out of the fund without the commission's approval.

Section 5: Examples of other Local Courthouses turned Historic Sites

In Tennessee alone, there are a few examples of local governments establishing historic courthouses and museums for historic preservation and education within the county. There are many, many examples outside of Tennessee as well.

Historic Clay County Courthouse and Museum

As many of you may already know, Clay County received registration on the NRHP for their former county courthouse in 1977. They continued use of the courthouse until 2012, when their new administration building was erected. The historic courthouse has been turned into a cultural center for history housing a museum and a theatre that houses historic events and productions as well as promoting music and arts in the county. The second floor of the Historic Clay County Courthouse is accessible only by staircase – a testament to the ADA exception possibility for historic properties.



Historic Clay County Courthouse

Rutherford County Historic Courthouse Museum

Rutherford County is another example of a museum that has been dedicated inside a historic courthouse. After the opening of their new Judicial Complex in 2019, Rutherford County Archives in association with MTSU, sought to dedicate the historic courthouse to be used as a museum and space for preservation and education. This museum is huge and provides an excellent source of local history and achieves what we would like the former Macon County Courthouse to portray.



Rutherford County Historic Courthouse Museum

Section 6: Required Renovations and Upgrades

ADA Compliance

As you all are aware, there is at least one project that would be required to meet ADA compliance *if* NRHP designation and an ADA exception are granted for the second-floor access. This project would be creating at least one ADA-accessible restroom in the building. As Mayor Jones previously mentioned, in the February 3rd meeting, the easiest would be to renovate one of the restrooms on the main floor into a unisex, accessible restroom to meet this requirement.

Asbestos

While there has been asbestos found in the flooring, in the upstairs of the former courthouse, there may not be any remedy necessary. There are three considerations here:

- A) if the ADA exception is not granted, then the closing of the second floor would not create any reason to remove the asbestos flooring as disturbing the tile would be highly unlikely.
- B) if the ADA exception is granted, there are two options: wax and seal over the tile to “seal in” the asbestos or cover the asbestos tile with another type of flooring.
- C) additionally, if the risk is deemed low, the asbestos tile could remain as-is as long as the flooring is never disturbed (broken, destroyed, or cracked), generally, there is no harm in the flooring remaining.

It is suitable to note, regarding the asbestos floor, that there is at least one building that is functioning as a school that has asbestos tile flooring. This building utilizes option B above to remedy the situation.

Lead Paint

Similarly to asbestos flooring, lead paint is found to generally be harmless IF it is not chipped, cracking, or exposing a risk to deteriorate further and becoming flaky and airborne. This is not as difficult to remedy as asbestos. While lead paint abatement is still not cheap or easy, it may not be necessary if the areas with lead paint are in good condition and not at risk of further deterioration.

Structural Integrity and Moisture

The county has already spent money in recent years on structural integrity and controlling the moisture issue that was present in the past. These two issues, as remedied, have been deemed in the past to be suitable to maintain the historic courthouse and keep those issues from arising again.

Section 7: Funding and Budget Considerations

While it has been nearly impossible to get actual figures on expenses currently in the budget to upkeep the former courthouse, historical society building, and archives building, we have done our best herein to exemplify the funding and budget considerations in a generalized manner.

Current Expenses

Currently, the county is maintaining general expenses (water, electrical, heating/cooling, insurance) on the former county courthouse, the historical society building, and the archives building. This proposal, if enacted, would eliminate the general maintenance expenses on the historical society and archives buildings and allow those funds to be either entirely cut or repurposed into the preservation fund, or to other county operations / expenses.

Selling of Current Buildings

In our initial estimate, it seems that the county could sell the two current buildings for around \$320,000 combined. At 907 Sycamore Street, the estimate is around \$200,000 and the 111 E Locust Street building is estimated at approximately \$120,000. These funds could be put into the historic preservation fund and used for the renovations and upkeep of this project for the future!

Federal Historic Preservation Fund Grants

One potential funding source is the Federal Historic Preservation Fund Grant program. This program could provide up to 60% coverage for renovation costs of the historic courthouse, to which the county would have to provide the other 40% (could be taken from the local HPF if established and the former buildings sold). These funds are available to preserve buildings in the NRHP or to prepare buildings for nomination to the NRHP. Many recipients in Tennessee received from \$25,000 to \$70,000 in 2024 for preservation projects.

National Trust Preservation Fund

This National Trust Fund for historic preservation has many programs for local preservation of historic buildings typically granting from \$5,000 to \$25,000 towards local preservation efforts through the Bartus Trew Preservation Fund. There are approximately 25 other programs and funds in the National Trust.

Local Fundraising

There are several ideas from community members on raising funds for the renovation, preservation and upkeep of the historic courthouse if used in this capacity.

- A) It was recommended selling engraved bricks along the pathways at the former courthouse could be a source. This could be a great funding source for local community members to get involved with donations at a low cost and still receive recognition.
- B) Another recommendation was that local businesses “sponsor” benches, signs, displays or even full areas of the museum if desired to bring in funding. Business names / logos could be display on the item(s) that were funded through their contributions.
- C) Local preservation organizations could organize local historic events to bring in revenue to the historic courthouse and help with upkeep.

Overall, there are many different avenues to help with funding and completion of this proposed use.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this proposal offers a comprehensive and strategic plan to preserve and repurpose the former courthouse as a valuable historic and cultural asset to Macon County. By pursuing National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) registration, establishing a museum, and relocating the Macon County Archives and Historical Society to the historic courthouse, we are not only preserving the building's rich heritage but also providing a central hub for education, research, and community engagement. The proposed Historic Preservation Fund will ensure the long-term sustainability of the courthouse and other historical sites; while fundraising efforts and the sale of current county buildings will help generate necessary financial support. This proposal aims to create a vibrant, educational space that honors Macon County's history, fosters civic pride, and strengthens the local economy through tourism and community involvement. The continued partnership of local organizations, businesses, and community members will be key to the success of this transformative project, ensuring that the courthouse stands as a lasting testament to the county's history for generations to come.

Statement to the Macon County Commission

Honorable Members of the Macon County Commission,

We respectfully submit this proposal for your consideration regarding the preservation and repurposing of the former Macon County Courthouse. The vision presented here aims to not only protect and celebrate the historical significance of this building but also to enhance our community's connection to its rich cultural heritage. By seeking registration on the National Register of Historic Places, establishing a county museum, and potentially relocating the Macon County Archives and Historical Society to the courthouse, we hope this proposal would create a vibrant, central hub for history and education in Macon County.

As we move forward with this initiative, we would greatly appreciate the Commission's input on any potential challenges or concerns that may arise throughout the process. Your insights and suggestions will be invaluable in refining this proposal and ensuring its success. Additionally, I welcome any ideas you may have regarding funding, community engagement, or the practical aspects of the project, particularly regarding ADA compliance, renovations, and the potential impact on our local government operations.

Together, we believe we can create a legacy that not only preserves the courthouse but also contributes to the cultural and educational development of Macon County.

We have developed this proposal with the input of numerous Macon Countians, both who wish to see the former courthouse remain, and those who wish to stop spending money on it. It is imperative that we work together, on both sides of this debate, to create a solution that embodies key points from both sides and navigates a solution for all.

Thank you for your time and your continued dedication to the future of our community.