

# Michigan's Hall of Justice: A Dream Deferred Comes True

*"I hope that the long continued assurances from some quarters that one day this Court will be housed in a new court building may before long come true...."*

—Chief Justice John Dethmers,  
May 9, 1967

In 1970, three years after Chief Justice Dethmers expressed his hope for a "new court building," another Chief Justice, Thomas Brennan, presided at the closing ceremony of the Supreme Court's courtroom in the capitol building. One of the featured speakers, Senator Thomas E. Schweigert, also voiced the hope that the G. Mennen Williams building, where the Court was to be housed, would only be "temporary headquarters" for the Court.

On October 12, 1999, almost three decades after the Michigan Supreme Court left its capitol courtroom for its "temporary" location in the Williams building, the Court broke ground on a new Hall of Justice. And in October 2002, Michigan's judiciary is finally coming to a home of its own—for the first time.

Michigan's Hall of Justice represents the fulfillment of generations' worth of planning and hope by the Michigan judicial branch. Like the capitol building, which faces the Hall of Justice across the capitol mall, the six-story Hall of Justice is the image of law in American democracy. In her address to the annual meeting of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society, Chief Justice Maura Corrigan described the Hall of Justice as a symbol of "the spirit of justice... a testament to ordered liberty in our state."

On a more practical level, the Hall of Justice offers benefits to judicial branch and public alike: improved public services, greater efficiency, and reduced expense. From the Hall of Justice Learning Center to the simple necessity of public lavatories, the Hall of



Justice makes Michigan's judicial branch far more accessible and welcoming.

Think about the typical visitor to the state capital. The state legislature is easy to find, and the dignity of the capitol building reflects the seriousness of the legislators' work. Members of the public can watch legislators in session and learn more about the process of making law.

But the capital visitor who wants to learn more about the judicial branch has a difficult task. Just locating the judiciary is a challenge, when the Michigan Supreme Court, Michigan Court of Appeals, and related agencies—State Court Administrative Office, Michigan Judicial Institute, Supreme Court Commissioners, and Michigan Board of Law Examiners—are housed in five separate buildings blocks apart in Lansing. Finding the courts requires a map, patience, and a keen eye for

the few available parking spaces, since neither court has its own public parking area. Once the visitor arrives, there are other inconveniences. For example, on the second floor of the Williams building, where the Supreme Court is located, there are no public restrooms. There are no conference rooms or other areas where attorneys can meet with their clients. Visiting school groups view the courtroom, and may attend oral arguments, but there is little else to see and do.

By contrast, members of the public who visit the Supreme Court in the Hall of Justice will find ample public parking. No need to peer at a map, or pore over the list of tenants in an office building—the Hall of Justice will be a dramatic and easily located landmark. The building's Jeffersonian architectural style echoes the design of the capitol building. Near the Hall of Justice entrance,

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the words "truth," "equality," "freedom," and "justice" will be engraved in granite, reminding visitors of the judicial branch's mission.

On the first of the Hall of Justice's six floors, visitors will find the 3,400-square-foot Hall of Justice Learning Center, as well as a conference center. The conference center will be used for continuing education by judges from across the state, as well as court staff and others who work in the judicial branch. The conference center represents significant savings for the judicial branch; in the past, holding a judicial education conference required renting space in a hotel or other conference facility. The Michigan Judicial Institute, which provides continuing education to judges, will also be housed on the first floor.

The second floor will house the Court of Appeals Clerk's office and courtroom, along with Court of Appeals research offices and information systems. The State Court Administrative Office for Region II (an area that comprises southwestern and south central Michigan) will also be located on the second floor. The third floor features the Court of Appeals judicial chambers and a library, along with a judges' conference room.

On the fourth floor, the Supreme Court Commissioners, Board of Law Examiners, Supreme Court Clerk's Office, and Supreme Court Reporter of Decisions offices will be located, as will the Supreme Court Crier's office. The fifth floor will house the Chief Justice and staff, the State Court Administrative Office, Finance Department, and Human Resources. The sixth floor will include the Supreme Court's judicial chambers, the Justices' conference room, and the Supreme Court courtroom. Located throughout the building, on all floors accessible to the public, are conference rooms and restrooms for use by visitors.

Of course, the judicial branch's low profile in the capital will be a thing of the past when 330 court employees are gathered together in one very public and identifiable building. Accordingly, the security of visitors, staff, and judges is an important consideration. In addition to X-ray screening and magnetometer equipment, over 70 closed circuit video cameras will monitor the interior and exterior of the Hall of Justice. Other security features, and professional security staff, will help protect the safety of public visitors and court staff.

By consolidating six offices into one building, Michigan's judicial branch will save a substantial amount in rent. One conserva-

tive estimate placed the total saved at \$203,995,977 over the next 25 years. Less easy to quantify, but just as real, are the benefits of having offices and staff located in one building: reduced mailing and transportation costs, less duplication of services (for example, maintenance, shipping and receiving, and storage), and better communication. In addition, the judicial branch's current Lansing facilities are not readily adaptable to wiring modifications required for current technology. The Hall of Justice has been constructed, not only to meet the demands of current technology, but with an eye to permitting future improvements.

The Hall of Justice should serve as a reminder, to the judiciary and to the public, of the essential role the justice system plays in American democracy. Although the Hall of Justice will house the judiciary, it is also a building for the people of Michigan: a place where the pursuit of justice is the mission, and a place to learn about the justice system's effect on our lives. ♦

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*The Hall of Justice nearing completion.*

Photo: Michael M. Smith