

Courthouse Frequently Asked Questions

Information courtesy of the THC

For more than 150 years, the Texas courthouse has been a local symbol of strength, pride, progress and democracy. Courthouses were – and continue to be – centers of public and business life in communities throughout the state. Because so many Texas communities literally grew up around a county courthouse, the structures are tangible links to the past. Marriages, trials, elections, parades, festivals, campaign rallies and community celebrations are just some of the events linked to historic county courthouses.

The Texas Historical Commission (THC) has identified approximately 220 courthouses built before 1948 that are still standing. Many of these are superior examples of architectural trends and styles, including Gothic Revival, Art Deco, Neoclassical, Renaissance Revival, Romanesque Revival and Second Empire. Eighty-six Texas courthouses are listed in the National Register of Historic Places; 78 are designated as Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks. Many more are eligible for historical designation.

Texas Courthouse History

Before Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836, Texans were under a centralized governmental structure based in Mexico City. After the victory at San Jacinto, the new Republic of Texas formed counties to create a framework for a localized governmental system. Courthouses were among the first permanent structures built in the new counties, and they immediately became symbols of local pride and self-government. No one knows the exact number of courthouses built in Texas since 1836, but the THC has identified more than 700 present and former courthouse sites, and other sites likely exist.

The “golden age” of courthouse construction began in 1881, soon after the state Legislature authorized counties to issue bonds to build new courthouses. Structures built between the late 19th and early 20th centuries were constructed as monuments of community justice and strength. Of the more than 220 historic courthouses, some 150 were built prior to 1920, and about 80 of those were built before the turn of the century.

Q. What is the condition of historic Texas courthouses?

By including Texas' historic courthouses on its 1998 list of “America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places,” the National Trust for Historic Preservation determined the combined structures are “threatened by neglect, deterioration, lack of maintenance, insufficient funds, inappropriate development or insensitive public policy.” Most of the state's historic courthouses are in various stages of disrepair, though 201 are still being used for county administration purposes. Existing problems include outdated electrical wiring, old and improper heating and air conditioning, lack of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, leaking roofs and other problems. Many of these buildings are vulnerable to fire, abandonment and even demolition. A few historic courthouses, such as the old Reagan County Courthouse in Stiles and the old Frio County Courthouse in Frio City, have been abandoned.

Q. How much money would be needed to repair and restore all of the state's historic courthouses properly?

THC architects who have made broad assessments of the structures estimate the cost could exceed \$750 million. _____

Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program:

Q. What are eligible and ineligible costs?

The Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program grants operate on a reimbursement basis. Counties

awarded grants will submit architectural plans for approval prior to executing the construction work. Project costs are eligible for reimbursement under the grant program, if they were not incurred prior to the grant award.

Expenses paid by the county and eligible for reimbursement include:

Professional fees and costs associated with the development of project

Plans and specifications

Hazardous materials testing

Building permits

Builder's risk insurance

Contractor's overhead and profit

Construction management services

Consultants' reports

Demolition

Payments to contractors for work performed on the approved scope

Other expenses related to the building preservation work approved by the THC Expenses ineligible for reimbursement include:

Master plan preparation

Grant application expenses

Temporary or permanent relocation expenses

Loan financing costs

Office equipment and furnishings

Work in non-historic additions

Landscape improvements

Window treatments

Q. What are Master Plans and when should they be used?

Master plans (master preservation plans) are based on the understanding that each historic property represents a unique and irreplaceable resource. They are a formal document for addressing changes to a resource during the planning process, for exploring alternative plans of action and for minimizing loss, damage or irreversible, adverse effects on historic fabric.

Master plans are prepared to assess and guide the effects of a proposed treatment or construction-related capital project on the existing fabric of a property. They are usually prepared immediately preceding a specific capital improvement project, and the resulting recommendations lead directly to construction documents and a capital improvement project.

Q. What information should be included in a Master Plan?

Generally, master plans should include the following major sections:

1. Architectural description
2. Historical background
3. Materials analysis
4. Treatment philosophy
5. Use and interpretation of the resource
6. Room-by-room analysis
7. Room and feature treatment recommendations
8. Prioritization and cost estimate
9. Maintenance plan
10. Physical project completion report
11. Annotated bibliography
12. Photographs
13. Glossary of terms

Q. What is an archival records plan?

An archival records plan addresses issues related to the protection, preservation and accessibility of all county records — not just those of county and district clerks, before, during and after the restoration work. The plan should be comprehensive in nature and include the following elements:

General inventory

The types of records involved – i.e. deeds, probate records, veteran muster records, court minutes, tax abstracts, working files, plat maps, architectural drawings, etc.

Space needs

Current space allocation Anticipated growth Equipment needs – i.e. copiers, film readers, etc.

Shelving and storage materials

Shelving type

Archival boxes and papers

Fire protection

Construction

Detection

Sprinkler or suppressant systems

Vaults

Security

Public access and use; copying procedures

Door and window types

Locks and keys

Backup copies – i.e. microfilm, digital, etc.

Lighting and UV protection

Fixtures and filters

Protection from natural light

Monitoring UV levels

Structural issues

Load estimates

Structural system type

Environmental issues

Plan for maintaining acceptable levels of temperature, humidity and air circulation

Records management compliance

Provide a statement that the county is in compliance with the Records Retention Schedule requirements of the State and Local Records Management Division of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC). If the county does not have a schedule on file with the state, please contact the TSLAC at 512-421-7200 for additional information.