

Courthouse gets a facelift

JULY 20, 2008 THE DAILY WORLD

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The St. Landry Parish Courthouse, first built in 1939, is getting a facelift with many improvements to various offices, a new sprinkler system for the grounds and new marble bathrooms throughout.

"These improvements have enlivened everyone else. The sheriff's office has renovated its civil side, the assessor's office, everyone is giving their offices a fresh look," said Parish President Don Menard. "You won't recognize the registrar of voters' office when they are through. This is all being done with the public in mind."

He said about 100 people work in the courthouse, and as the headquarters of parish government, more than 500 people pass through the courthouse doors every day to visit the courts, assessor's, clerk of courts, registrar of voters and other parish offices.

"It is a beautiful building. You can travel the entire state and not find anything nicer than this courthouse. We want to keep it up," Menard said.

To make it easier for the hundreds of visitors, the parish is also in the process of installing a new parking lot nearby for parish workers. This is expected to free up badly needed parking spaces around the building for visitors.

"We should break ground on that at the end of July," Menard said.

While the tree-shaded grounds are now a thing of beauty, it wasn't always so. In the 1980s, the building and grounds had fallen into disrepair. Thanks to a broad-based citizens movement spearheaded by Rod Manuel, that would change in 1990.

While he has passed on, his widow, Nada Manuel, continues to volunteer her time to help maintain the grounds.

Manuel praised Menard and his team, especially Public Works Director Tim Marks, for helping bring her husband's vision to reality.

"We are fortunate to have people like that working for us. They are doing a fantastic job. If you had seen this place a few year ago, you won't believe it is the same place," Manuel said.

"Every time it rained the sidewalks would be caked in mud, the parking meters were all cockeyed from where people had run into them. The old City Hall was a real eyesore," Manuel said. "It is good to see the work continued. It's a beautiful sight to see."

Rod Manuel returned to his hometown following his retirement in 1979 and soon became then Mayor John Joseph's Clean City chairman, helping to clean up neighborhoods and get rid of junked cars.

"He loved his hometown. He want to do what he could for his community," Manuel said.

He would be active in the early days Le Vieux Village, helping with the relocation of many historic buildings to the site that now serves as the city's tourism center.

In 1988 he set about restoring the courthouse grounds, largely with volunteer labor and donations from the public.

"He was there everyday. The trustees did most of the work and he worked right along with them," Manuel said.

One of the first improvements was the retaining wall around the entire square to prevent erosion. That was followed by landscaping and numerous other improvements, both inside and out.

As part of that landscaping, donations were solicited for the decorative street lighting, with individuals and businesses each agreeing to sponsor one light.

Groups like the Woodmen of the World would donate lights for the flag poles and flags to fly from them. "The parish didn't even fly the flag before that," Manuel said. "The support was there from the community all the way. It was wonderful to see the way everyone helped."

One of the most elaborate projects on the square was the restoration of the old City Hall, which had fallen into ruin.

Clerk of Courts Charlie Jagneaux would supervise the restoration of the crumbling walls, collapsing windows and rotten lumber, helping transform it into a home for the parish's tourism office as well as a heavily used meeting facility for the city and parish.

While he would pass away with the work still underway in 2000, Manuel said many others made sure his vision never died.

The gazebo on the grounds that he plan is now a reality and the planned sprinkler system has just been completed.

"Rod would be so happy to know the project he started and dreamed of has now been completed. Thanks to Don Menard and our citizens and organizations on the completion. Our courthouse square is an example of what people can do all when we work together," Manuel said.