



## The Patriot-News

### LONG JOURNEY

#### Best site for federal courthouse remains at Sixth, Reily streets

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At the start of the journey to build a new federal courthouse in Harrisburg, if the General Services Administration had put forth the idea of demolishing the current courthouse at Third and Walnut streets and erecting a new one on the same site, few would have objected.

But this is the third recommendation to emerge from GSA since it announced in June 2005 that it had selected three potential sites for a new courthouse, all of which proved controversial. That announcement, and a second failed attempt by GSA to come up with suitable sites, actually served a valuable purpose. It forced Harrisburg and its citizens to think a little deeper about their city, its future and the best possible location for a significant project worth \$130 million or more.

This discourse saw multiple sites in the city suggested as better than those recommended by GSA. But the longer the discussion went on, the clearer it became that the community overwhelmingly viewed the area at Sixth and Reily streets, in the city's midtown, as best suited for the courthouse. It was a site that offered GSA the greatest range of options in developing the building, it would have the least impact on the city's tax rolls, and it would generate the most economic development in a city finally recovering from decades of deterioration.

So while one could conclude that the current site of the four-decade-old federal courthouse is the best location for a replacement, it's still not the ideal site. That site continues to be in the midtown, where the community believes its federal tax dollars would best serve the interests of the federal courts and the people it serves.

It's astonishing to us the range of perturbations GSA's search for a site has taken. Its first three choices would have leveled either a residential neighborhood or a high-rise for low-income senior citizens. Out of that mix the agency eventually recommended the midtown site occupied by Cumberland Court Apartments, the most attractive low-income housing in the city.

In the beginning, site selection understandably was driven in part by security concerns in our post-9/11 world, requiring a site with a large footprint. But in the second round, this concern quietly vanished. Advances in architectural techniques and materials, we were informed, allowed for a building with a relatively small footprint. In June, GSA said it would choose between the southwest corner of Third and Pine streets and the southeast corner of Second and Locust streets to build the courthouse.

Out-of-town architects hired by GSA had the audacity to suggest that the iconic building they would come up with would help fill in the "missing teeth" of the Harrisburg skyline. Coincidentally, it would take small businesses, a vibrant streetscape and tax-paying properties along with it. This was another disastrous proposal that went against the grain of a strong community preference for a building on a site that would add measurably to the city's economic expansion, not detract from it.

The current courthouse has long been deemed "deficient," in no small part because it is crammed on to a small city block, with but a sidewalk between the curb and the mundane 1960s-style glass-faced edifice. Certainly GSA could build a better building on the site.

But can they build the best possible federal courthouse for Harrisburg there? We think the evidence is overwhelming that they cannot, and the best site remains at Sixth and Reily.

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