



October 7, 2011

**Submitted by email**

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**RE: New Glendale Courthouse Draft Focused EIR, Glendale, California**

Dear Ms. Saniz:

On behalf of the Los Angeles Conservancy, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the New Glendale Courthouse Draft Focused Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR). The Conservancy has serious concerns regarding the current project proposal and its lack of detail and analysis. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) fails to make a good faith effort to consider a range of feasible alternatives that would retain the Glendale County Building's eligibility for historic designation while adapting it to meet the courts' needs in conjunction with appropriate new construction on the site. We strongly believe such a solution is feasible and would meet the project objectives, as well as AOC's court facilities standards.

**I. Historic Significance of the Glendale County Building**

The Glendale County Building exemplifies architectural design of the Modern era, and the construction of distinct, locally-specific regional courthouses throughout Los Angeles County in the post-World War II era. The Glendale County Building was built in 1959 and designed by local architect Arthur Wolfe with landscaping by Arthur G. Baron. It has long been recognized as an important example of mid-century office design in the Glendale Civic Center campus. A cohesive modern design is achieved through its distinctive brick serpentine wall that stretches along Broadway and which contrasts with the solid rectangular volume of the architectural concrete panels at the eastern and the transparent glass wall on the western elevations.

Other distinctive character-defining features include the stepped entrance canopy that follows the sloping grade; the undulating underside of the T-shaped building's elevated rear wing; integrated planting beds; and the landscaped courtyard at the eastern end of the site. The north façade contains a site-specific ceramic sculpture by George Stanley depicting the ideals of liberty, freedom and justice under the law. Until recently, the east

and west facades both had original pin-mounted metal letter signage typical of civic buildings from the postwar era. Signage spelled out, “Glendale County Building.” While a small design element, its recent removal and replacement with inappropriate signage results in the loss of a character-defining feature (see Attachment A). Until the environmental review process has been completed and a project approved, we would respectfully request that AOC refrain from removing or altering any additional original features that may compromise the integrity of the building,

The interior of the Glendale County Building also features some key character-defining features, including, but not limited to, the terrazzo flooring, floating staircase, large chandeliers with upright lamps, and the exposed interior of the serpentine brick wall with integrated, curved wood benches following the wall’s contours.

The Draft EIR evaluated the Glendale County Building as individually eligible for the California Register of Historic Resources and the National Register of Historic Places. With its location on Broadway across from the 1942 Glendale City Hall and the 1966 Municipal Service Building, the Glendale County Building should also be considered a contributing structure to a potential Glendale Civic Center Campus historic district.

## **II. The Proposed Project Will Jeopardize the Historic Status of the Glendale County Building and Have a Significant Adverse Impact**

Under the proposed project, AOC intends to “retain architecturally significant elements of the existing courthouse while the remainder of the courthouse would be demolished.”<sup>1</sup> While it is not explicitly stated in the Draft EIR, it appears from the *Site Feasibility Report*, compiled by Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects in November 2010 that only the façade along Broadway and a sliver of the existing building would be potentially retained. This radical alteration severs the relationship between the building and its historic meaning and would in essence destroy the Glendale County Building as a significant historic resource. As a stand-alone element, this would also present a false sense of history. This is not an acceptable approach for historic preservation, does not adhere to the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* (the *Standards*), and would result in the loss of eligibility for the building as a historic resource. The Draft EIR rightly identifies this as a significant adverse impact under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and that the proposed mitigation measures for documentation through reports, illustrations and commemorative plaques cannot adequately mitigate the loss of the resource.

Nonetheless, it is premature to conclude that significant adverse impacts to historic resources are unavoidable. Despite AOC claims that it “may not be possible...to avoid the site losing its eligibility for State and National Register...[t]herefore, the EIR has assumed that the entire courthouse may need to be reconstructed...,” no sufficient analysis is provided within the Draft EIR to justify and substantiate this conclusion. The Draft EIR further contends that “it may also be necessary to completely reconstruct the [Glendale

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<sup>1</sup> Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, “New Glendale Courthouse Draft Focused Environmental Impact Report,” August 2011, pg. 3-11.

Courthouse] building depending on seismic safety, structural integrity, construction conditions, security and/or operational considerations.”<sup>2</sup> The code flexibility offered under the California Historical Building Code has often enabled historic buildings to meet the performance standards of current life-safety, seismic and accessibility standards, while meeting the *Standards*, as illustrated by the examples below.

Lacking sufficient reports and documentation, the feasibility of retaining and reusing the Glendale County Building has not been adequately evaluated. Based on objective analyses found in the EIR, agencies “shall mitigate or avoid the significant effects on the environment... whenever it is feasible to do so.”<sup>3</sup> The lead agency cannot merely adopt a statement of overriding considerations and approve a project with significant impacts; it must first adopt feasible alternatives and mitigation measures.<sup>4</sup> Overall more detailed analysis must be provided to fully explore and evaluate all feasible alternatives and implement meaningful mitigation measures.

### **III. Feasible Alternatives and Mitigation Measures Exist That Avoid or Substantially Lessen Impacts on Historic Resources**

A key policy under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is the lead agency’s duty to “take all action necessary to provide the people of this state with historic environmental qualities and preserve for future generations examples of major periods of California history.”<sup>5</sup> CEQA “requires public agencies to deny approval of a project with significant adverse effects when feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures can substantially lessen such effects.”<sup>6</sup> Courts often refer to the EIR as “the heart” of CEQA because it provides decision makers with an in-depth review of projects with potentially significant environmental impacts and analyzes a range of alternatives that reduce those impacts.<sup>7</sup>

The Draft EIR has identified only one alternative that preserves the Glendale County Building, meets most of the project objectives, and is the environmentally superior alternative. While AOC rejected this Full Re-Use Alternative because it does not meet all project objectives, the fact that an environmentally superior alternative may be more costly or fails to meet all project objectives does not necessarily render it infeasible under CEQA.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Draft EIR, pg. 4.3-11.

<sup>3</sup> Public Resource Code Secs 21002.1

<sup>4</sup> PRC Secs 21081; *Friends of Sierra Madre v. City of Sierra Madre* (2001) 25 Cal.4<sup>th</sup> 165, 185).

<sup>5</sup> PRC Sec. 21001 (b),(c).

<sup>6</sup> *Sierra Club v. Gilroy City Council* (1990) 222 Cal.App.3d 30, 41, italics added; also see PRC Secs. 21002, 21002.1.

<sup>7</sup> *County of Inyo v. Yorty* (1973) 32 Cal.App.3d 795; *Laurel Heights Improvement Association v. Regents of the University of California* (1993) 6 Cal.4<sup>th</sup> 1112, 1123.

<sup>8</sup> *Citizens of Goleta Valley v. Board of Supervisors* (1998) 197 Cal.App.3d 1167, 1181. It should be noted that the project objectives to “replace the unsafe, overcrowded, and physically and functionally deficient court-occupied spaces,” create “a modern, secure courthouse,” and “create operational efficiencies” can be achieved without demolishing the Glendale County Building or jeopardizing its eligibility as a historic resource.

However, no attempt was made in the Full Re-Use Alternative or through another alternative to incorporate new construction in order to meet the project objectives for additional space or to conform to the specifications of the *California Trail Court Facilities Standards*. AOC failed to consider feasible alternatives that would expand the existing building's capacity and improve functionality through a sensitively designed addition on the site. This approach would allow for a reuse and reconfiguration of the existing Glendale County Building, and help meet the security, programmatic and square footage needs. Further, it would achieve all of the project objectives and retain the eligibility of the Glendale County Building as a historic resource.

**a. The existing site can accommodate sensitive additions or new construction**

According to the 2010 *Site Feasibility Report*, slightly less than 100,000 square feet of space is required by AOC to maintain the functional and programmatic demands of court-related uses in Glendale. An additional 10,000 square feet is required by the County of Los Angeles for various uses not under the AOC jurisdiction. The existing building's 56,986 square feet of floor area represents more than half of the 109,000 square feet planned for the proposed project. The footprint of the Glendale County Building, including its rear elevated wing and the significant landscaped courtyard at its east entrance, occupies little more than half of the existing site. New construction that doubles the building's existing square footage can be accommodated through 3-, 4-, or 5-story additions similar to the east and west wings of the proposed project, or in a stand-alone building located at the surface parking lot at the rear of the site. A 1-story rooftop addition set sufficiently back and minimally visible from the street may also be a viable option.

While Site Strategy 1 in the 2010 *Site Feasibility Report* retained the majority of the Glendale County Building and constructed a new 3-story building onsite, it inexplicably excluded the Board of Realtor Building in its site analysis, and failed to reuse any portion of the existing building for court-related or public service uses. It also located parking offsite at the Honda dealership, which may potentially impact historic resources as well.

The inclusion of the Board of Realtors and potentially the Jewel City Bowl buildings within the project site expands the options for meeting the space requirements of AOC. This offers flexibility for parking, ample room for new courthouse construction, and creative site planning which, if designed creatively, can retain and continue to use the existing Glendale County Building. For instance, the four-level parking garage proposed for the Board of Realtors site could be placed partially or wholly underground and new courthouse and/or county services space constructed above. This in turn can be connected to the current Glendale County Building utilizing the elevated rear central wing. No information about required or proposed parking spaces is included in the Draft EIR, but necessary parking could be accommodated through an above or below ground parking structure at the east end of the surface parking lot.

**b. The Glendale County Building can be rehabilitated and retrofitted to retain its historic status and meet current codes**

The Full Re-Use Alternative assumes it will be feasible to enlarge the courtrooms and hallways, achieve ADA compliance, and address security requirements while retaining the building's eligibility as a historic resource and avoiding significant adverse impacts.

As with any historic building, options often exist for rehabilitation that can accommodate current functional, performance, and security demands, including sustainability goals, while meeting the *Standards*. Examples of successful rehabilitation of historic courthouses, both traditional and modern, can be found throughout California and the country. Two examples from the late 1990s are the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the California State Building, which has the state supreme court as its principal occupant, in San Francisco. Both structures sustained damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and both utilized the California Historical Building Code to meet updated life-safety, seismic and building code standards.

The AOC has recently renovated the 1967 B.F. Sisk Courthouse in Fresno, and is in the process of renovating the 1911 Old Solano Courthouse in Fairfield (Solano County) as well as rehabilitating and expanding the 1894 Historic Courthouse in Willows (Glenn County). We urge it to apply the same flexibility, creative problem-solving, and sensitivity to historic resources to the Glendale County Building so that this distinguished local landmark may continue to symbolize the Court's presence in Glendale and serve its community for another half-century.

At the federal level, the General Services Administration also has extensive experience with retrofitting historic courthouses nationally, as well as upgrading Modern-era buildings for ADA and security compliance. The historic courthouses at the state and national levels may be larger and more ornate than the Glendale County Building, but the successful preservation of these significant landmarks can offer strategies and approaches that can be applied to the Glendale building.

**IV. Conclusion**

The Trial Court Design Standards calls on the AOC design team to consider the effect on the environment, specifically the “[s]election of sites requiring reclamation and cleanup, or sites with historic buildings, [that] may reduce environmental impact and serve as successful examples of reuse.”

Historic courthouse facilities have been successfully adapted and reused – while retaining the essential form and envelope of the historic resource. We strongly urge AOC to explore a modified Full Re-Use Alternative or an additional preservation alternative as part of the Final EIR as the Conservancy believes it offers the best option for achieving both project objectives and the preservation of a significant historic resource

We look forward to working further with AOC on the Glendale County Building, as well as on other courthouse projects in Los Angeles County. Please feel free to contact me at [afine@laconservancy.org](mailto:afine@laconservancy.org) or 213-430-4203 should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adrian Scott Fine". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Adrian Scott Fine  
Director of Advocacy

cc: Glendale Historical Society  
City of Glendale, Planning Division  
California Preservation Foundation