

# **WHITFIELD COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OK LEASE FOR OFFICE SPACE AT WELLS FARGO**

Several administrative offices, Public Defender's Office, and accountability courts will be changing locations, with an expected early-summer move

In light of the ongoing problems necessitating the impending closure of Administration Building No. 2, several Whitfield County offices will soon be changing the locations where they serve the public.

With voters turning down the March 19 SPLOST that would have provided funds to construct two new administrative buildings for county offices, the Board of Commissioners has developed a temporary alternative plan.

The board voted 4-0 in a special called meeting on Thursday to execute a two-year lease for office space on the top three floors of the Wells Fargo Bank at 201 S. Hamilton St.

County administration, engineering, information technology, finance, human resources, and public relations offices will move to the fourth and fifth floors from Administration Building No. 1, and the Public Defender's Office will move to the third floor from space that the county is currently renting on Waugh Street.

Each floor is a little more than 6,000 square feet and will not require any major remodeling. Employees and the public will have access to the county offices from the Wells Fargo parking deck and from Hamilton Street.

Meanwhile, accountability courts (Domestic Violence Court, Drug Court, and Mental Health Court) will be moving from Administration Building No. 2 into the vacated space at Administration Building No. 1.

"We believe this to be the best plan for our current circumstances," County Administrator Mark Gibson said, "and will be in keeping with the most fluid operation of county government for the betterment of the citizens who pay for it."

Target date to begin operations in the new locations will be July 1 or sooner if possible.

After being vacated, Administration Building No. 2 will be closed to any occupancy by staff or public because of its many structural and safety problems, as indicated most recently by the Dalton Fire Department, which sent the county a three-page letter last year explaining how the building fails to meet the fire

code, including insufficient emergency lighting, use of extension cords because of insufficient electrical wiring, and no central fire alarm system.

Commissioners are still studying their ultimate decision with respect to the property on which Admin 2 sits. A proposed new county administration building remains under consideration, along with other options.

Admin 2 currently houses the commissioners' meeting room, the offices of the accountability courts, and the RESOLV (Recognizing, Exposing, Stopping Our Learned Violence) Project anger management program, a nonprofit program that works with the accountability courts in Whitfield and Murray counties and the Northwest Georgia Family Crisis Center.

No decision has been made on where the commission meetings will be held after the move, though the leased space includes a room suitable at least for work sessions.

The funds that would otherwise be spent on rent and utilities for the current location of the Public Defender's Office and utilities at Administration Building No. 2 will pay a significant portion of the cost of the lease with Wells Fargo, county officials said.

Commissioners settled on the Wells Fargo building after weeks of studying potential options. Many other locations were considered for accountability courts, but they were not a good fit for the courts or the property owners. With the defeat of the proposed new gymnasiums in the SPLOST, the Gillespie gym was still badly needed for youth basketball, so renovation of that facility for accountability courts had to be postponed.

"These moves are by no means permanent fixes but will temporarily address the most critical space needs while the commissioners take another look at all reasonable options for providing adequate facilities to be able to serve the public as efficiently as possible," said Chairman Lynn Laughter.