

Nye County plans to reclaim Belmont courthouse

by Ed Vogel - LVRJ/AP Exchange
09.23.12 - 09:41 pm

CARSON CITY — With state government waddling through financial problems, a second state park probably will be transferred to a county that can better afford its upkeep. State Assemblyman Pete Goicoechea, R-Eureka, introduced legislation in February to shift control of the Belmont Courthouse State Historical Site from the Division of State Parks to Nye County. The 136-year-old courthouse is off U.S. Highway 376 about 255 miles northwest of Las Vegas. Because the state and Nye County already agree on the transfer, it is a done deal.

The state parks budget was cut by 39.5 percent in the legislative session last year. In that session, the state terminated its agreement with Douglas County to operate the Dangberg Ranch State Historic Site in Minden, citing a lack of resources. State park funding in the current two-year budget is \$6.4 million, down from \$16.1 million in the 2007-09 period. But the worst is over, state Parks Administrator David Morrow said. None of the 23 remaining state parks is in danger of closure, transfer to a new owner or curtailed hours of operation, he said. "It is the governor's intention not to see parks closed," Morrow said. "We lost 60 percent of our funding, and we are operating at about the same level as previously, but with a few less staff."

Nevada isn't alone in its lack of funding for state parks. Five state parks in California were closed in July because of that state's budget shortfall. Morrow said he is grateful for the help Nye County already has provided. The county contributed \$70,000 to reroof the leaking courthouse. The work should be done soon. "Nye County feels it can do a better job maintaining and showing it off," Goicoechea said. "It makes a lot of sense." Morrow agreed.

"The prospects of us doing much to improve its condition is low," he said. The state acquired the courthouse from the county in 1974. According to a state park website, Belmont's history started with a silver claim filed in 1865, followed by a "handsomely laid out town" including a bank, a school, two churches, telegraph service, post office, general store and competing newspapers. A Mining Journal reported that 20 of the 50 buildings in Belmont were whiskey shops, and that by 1867 the population reached 2,000, second in the state only to that of Virginia City.

Nye County made Belmont the county seat, and in 1875, a handsome, two-story brick courthouse was built for official business. The following year, the silver mines went into decline. Population dwindled, with county employees accounting for most of the population until 1905, when the county seat was moved to Tonopah. Belmont now has seven residents.

Closed for the better part of a century, the red-brick Belmont Courthouse is open by appointment made at a nearby bed-and-breakfast. The state cannot afford guides, much less the cost of fixing broken windows and vandalism to the building's interior.

The site is well off the beaten path. The most publicity it has received in recent years was with a possible connection to the infamous Manson family. Graffiti carved in the courthouse reads "Charlie

Manson + Family 1969." Some area residents believe the Manson family squatted in the courthouse in the months before the Los Angeles killing spree that brought it to infamy.

The interior of the building has never been restored, and Russ Dapsauski, regional director for state parks in Las Vegas, said all walls are covered with graffiti, some dating to the 1800s. Restoration plans include saving much of it. As far as the Manson story, he only says, "I wasn't there, so I can't say whether it is true." Lorinda Wichman, the Nye County commissioner in the area that includes Belmont, said a nonprofit organization, Friends of the Belmont Courthouse, has started to raise funds for restoration. Members include Nevada Supreme Court Justice Kris Pickering and Fifth Judicial District Judge Kim Wanker, and the building may be transferred to the group, which unlike the county can use volunteer labor and have fundraisers, Wichman said.

Donations of vintage furniture and other items have been received to restore at least two courthouse rooms. Once the courthouse is restored, Wichman said judges might hold court there on special occasions. Donna Motis, chairwoman of Friends of the Belmont Courthouse, said her organization needs to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to restore the courthouse. The 40-member group raised \$2,300 at a recent event. Now that the roof will be fixed, the next challenge will be a \$100,000 campaign to replace windows, making the building weatherproof again. Motis, who lives in Tonopah and also has a home in Belmont, sometimes conducts tours of the courthouse. A sign on the building directs tourists where to find a guide.

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