

**Presidential Award 2008 Nomination
Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program
Summary Description**

1. Overview:

a. Project Description:

In the late-20th century, most of Texas' historic county courthouses were in a state of disrepair and were threatened with demolition and destruction. In 1998, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Texas' historic courthouses to its list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The Texas Historical Commission (THC) and Preservation Texas made a call to action, and in 1999, Gov. George W. Bush called for the creation of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program using funds appropriated by the Texas Legislature. This program's mission and scope bring the state, counties and local citizens together in a unique partnership to restore and revitalize these historic courthouses, not as museums but as viable working government centers, symbolic of the past and the future and valuable heritage tourism destinations. The THC's Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program is a highly successful matching grant program, to date providing \$145 million to 64 counties for the preservation of their county courthouses. The program restored 39 courthouses throughout the state and 87 additional historic county courthouses are now enrolled in the program.

b. Applicability of Award Criteria:

The Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program represents one of the largest and most far-reaching initiatives ever conceived by a state government to preserve a particular type of heritage asset. The commitment by the state of Texas to fund and staff this grant program has been sustained over a seven-year period. The program is highly successful in contributing to the rebirth of these icons of democracy and justice, and serves as a catalyst for economic revitalization and heritage tourism in many Texas communities. For the traveling public, county courthouses are one of the state's most popular heritage tourism destinations. These architectural gems are not only aesthetically beautiful to behold, but provide the traveler with an immediate sense of direction, a landmark for establishing their location in an unfamiliar town, a public place to stop for assistance and a strong sense of the community's culture and history. County courthouses are a major focal point of the award-winning Texas Heritage Trails Program and are often the centerpiece of local historic districts and Main Street areas.

c. Significant Outcomes:

- These revitalized county courthouses are catalysts for economic development in the business districts surrounding the courthouses. Restaurants, shops, offices and other new enterprises have appeared as a result of courthouse revitalization. As a direct effect of the first \$145 million in grant funds, the total in courthouse rehabilitations has generated 4,692 jobs, more than \$130 million in local income and more than \$177 million in gross state product. Following the completion of a project, the restored courthouse serves as a focal point for heritage tourism, bringing further income and recognition to the community.
- Texas courthouses are a curiosity, a passion and a hobby for many. Numerous publications, web sites and travel guides such as *Texas Highways* magazine, AAA guides and the AARP publications attest to the devotees' desire to visit courthouses as travel destinations themselves. In fact, hundreds of enthusiasts aim to visit all 254 county courthouses in Texas.
- The economic impact from the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program is significant. The state's investment of \$145 million is matched by counties who have contributed over \$64 million toward their respective projects. The program's required local match is a minimum 15 percent of the state award, but some counties have contributed as much as 75 percent of the project cost. Most county matches are paid directly from county expenditures or bonds but in some cases, such as Red River County, the entire match was raised through private contributions.
- The prevalent attitude of many county officials and local citizens toward these buildings has reversed, from widespread neglect and disregard of the resource to full appreciation and support for its preservation. Recently, Judge Truman Dougharty, whose Newton County Courthouse almost burned due to faulty wiring and now begins its restoration, told *The Beaumont Enterprise*, "It's worth it. The courthouse holds memories. It's where locals were married. It attracted tourist-filled buses in the winter.

They came to see the Christmas lights and take pictures.” Judge Doherty also said, “The repaired building could lead to more economic development. We could put up a flat, cinder block building a lot cheaper and faster. It wouldn’t be the same thing. There is something to be said of preserving history when you can.” The counties’ enthusiasm for this program is tremendous; nearly half of all Texas’ 254 counties are now participants in the program.

- The THC’s Courthouse Stewardship Program is the first statewide effort to provide technical assistance and training to county facility managers for the care of historic county buildings. The program is designed to ensure that the investment of the taxpayer is well protected in the future by promoting good stewardship and maintenance practices. The THC has committed its professional staff to annually inspect the buildings and provide technical assistance and training to county facility managers. Sponsored by the Texas Land Title Association, our second annual workshop is scheduled for April 2008 and will focus on development of maintenance schedules and budgeting.

2. Cultural Heritage Significance:

The state of Texas is fortunate to have a premier collection of historic county courthouses, unmatched in quantity and in architectural diversity. In the 254 Texas counties, more than 234 courthouses remain that are historic with some dating to the mid-1800s. They represent outstanding examples of Romanesque Revival, Italianate, Mission Revival and adobe styles. To date, 117 current or former courthouses are listed in the National Register of Historic Places and another 90 are currently eligible for listing. Each property participating in the courthouse preservation program is either listed in or determined eligible for the National Register. Texas county courthouses often represent the highest architectural achievement within a county and serve as the most recognizable symbol of the county’s heritage.

3. Role of Government Entity and Partners:

The THC is one of the largest and most recognized state historic preservation agencies in the nation. Established in 1953, it has a staff of more than 115. The agency administers a variety of historic preservation programs including the award-winning Texas Heritage Trails Program, Texas Main Street Program and the La Salle Shipwreck Project. The Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program has a professional staff of eight. The THC partners with public and private organizations to help preserve the state’s architectural heritage. Without the assistance of these partners, the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program would have greater difficulty achieving its goals.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has worked to save historic places in Texas through direct intervention in preservation projects, technical assistance and advocacy. When the National Trust listed Texas’ historic courthouses on its America’s 11 Most Endangered Places list in 1998, it was the first time 225 buildings were chosen to represent some of the most endangered properties in America. This served as a wake-up call to Texans and prompted legislators to create this unique program.

Preservation Texas is a private, nonprofit membership organization founded in 1985. It has hosted its Annual Preservation Day bi-annually since 1999 in Austin to advocate initial and continued funding for the THC’s Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program. Its traveling exhibit is used to heighten awareness of the need to preserve this particular cultural heritage asset. Furthermore, Preservation Texas, in partnership with KLRU (PBS) television, recently produced “Historic Texas Courthouses: Foundations for the Future,” to highlight the successes of the courthouse program.

The Texas Society of Architects (TSA), the statewide affiliate of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), is another partner that promotes the program and spreads word of its achievements. Numerous articles on the program and highlights of individual projects have been featured in *Texas Architect* magazine. “The Shape of Texas,” a radio program developed and sponsored by TSA, includes a dozen historic Texas county courthouses. A tour of restored county courthouses was offered in conjunction with the AIA’s National Convention in San Antonio in May 2007.

The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation is the state regulatory agency responsible for enforcing accessibility standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Architectural Barriers Division of the agency mandates accessibility in publicly and privately funded buildings and facilities. In an important partnership with the THC, a memorandum of understanding between the two state agencies streamlines the review and

approval process for Texas' qualifying historic courthouses. At the same time, the agreement ensures a project achieves maximum accessibility without threatening or destroying the historic fabric of the historic courthouse.

Most recently, THC gained another valuable partner, the Texas Land Title Association (TLTA). Title companies have a long relationship with Texas county courthouses as guardians of the records and deeds of ownership of home and property. The TLTA is a trade association founded in 1908 whose nearly 2,000 members include title insurance underwriting companies and title agents. "The Texas Land Title Association is proud to support the Texas Historical Commission's efforts to preserve and maintain our state's historic county courthouses," said TLTA President R. Bruce Boyer, "Title companies are frequent and appreciative users of courthouse resources and we believe this is an additional way to assist the counties we serve throughout Texas." The Courthouse Stewardship Program is the first statewide outreach initiative of TLTA.

4. Cost Figures:

The program has received \$207 million since 1999, a remarkable achievement given the Texas Legislature's fiscal challenges since the program's inception. The program continues to receive support from Texas legislators is testament to the enthusiasm of Texans for these grand community treasures, as well as to the economic benefits resulting from these restoration projects. Thus far, the program has been administered by the following funding sources:

- \$50 million in general revenue appropriated by the Texas Legislature in 1999 for FY 2000-01
- \$50 million in general revenue appropriated by the Texas Legislature in 2001 for FY 2002-03
- \$45 million in bond funding appropriated by the Texas Legislature in 2003 for FY 2004-05
- \$62 million in bond funding appropriated by the Texas Legislature in 2007 for FY 2008-09 (\$31 million pending November 2007 bond election)

Currently, all but one percent administrative expense of the \$145 million Texas lawmakers earmarked for the program through fiscal year 2005 has been distributed to counties engaged in courthouse restoration and emergency repair.

5. Previous Awards and Recognition:

The program has been recognized nationally and internationally with prestigious awards by numerous organizations, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Preservation Award, the National Council of State Historic Preservation Officers' Award of Excellence, as well as awards from the Association for Preservation Technology International and the Texas Society of Architects. Completed individual projects have received awards of excellence from contractor, masonry, business and architectural organizations.

The achievements of the program have been widely disseminated in various media. The courthouses have been the subject of a Texas radio program, a regular feature of *County Progress*, *Texas Lawyer* and *Texas Architect* magazines, and two independent film documentaries. News of the program and progress reports on particular projects are regularly featured in major daily newspapers across the state. The program's success has drawn inquiries from Illinois, Oklahoma, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana and Ontario, Canada, all seeking to establish their own versions of the program.

6. Program Schedule:

So far, 37 counties have rededicated their fully restored courthouses with the most recent rededication on October 27, 2007, at the DeWitt County Courthouse in Cuero, Texas. To date, approximately 60 grant projects are completed, 5 more are under way and it is anticipated that 25 new construction and planning projects will be funded as a result of Round V in 2008-09. The THC's goal is to restore all the remaining eligible historic county courthouses for the enjoyment and benefit of all Texans.