

Webster County thanks citizens for patience, other officials for help

January 28, 2013

Webster County residents paid taxes and attorneys filed court documents Monday morning in Eupora as county government offices reopened in temporary facilities for the first time after a Jan. 17 fire heavily damaged the County Courthouse in Walthall.

Offices of the Webster County Chancery Clerk, Circuit Clerk, Tax Assessor-Collector, and County Purchasing Clerk have temporarily moved from the Webster County Courthouse in Walthall to 16 East Fox Avenue in Eupora. County offices displaced from Walthall will temporarily share space with the Webster County Extension Service and the Webster County Justice Court

Government offices were up and running Monday, although not always smoothly. Officials, staff and technicians continued to work to solve problems associated with the move. Difficulties with computer interfaces delayed car tag sales in the office of the Webster County Tax Assessor-Collector. Some early customers paid property taxes and agreed to come back later in the day for computer-generated receipts. By Monday afternoon, residents were able to renew vehicle tags, but not buy new tags.

“Thanks for being patient,” Tax Assessor-Collector Barbara Gore told a customer who showed up shortly after 8 a.m. at the temporary tax office.

Webster County Board of Supervisors President Pat Cummings said, “We just appreciate our citizens of Webster County bearing with us. It’s going to be better than it’s ever been....We are on the road to recovery.”

“We are improvising at every opportunity,” Webster County Chancery Clerk Russell Turner said as he searched for and found a file stamp. His new office used to be a County Extension Service classroom. After finding the file stamp in a desk drawer, he stamped a deed as recorded.

District 5 Supervisor Doug Burgess on Monday morning finished installing a metal door on a vault for the Circuit Clerk. The vault was already there. The rambling county owned building used to be a car dealership.

“We are just going to make do,” Circuit Clerk Deborah Hood Neal said.

On Monday afternoon, Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. visited the temporary county offices and the burned Courthouse and discussed recovery plans. Chief Justice Waller met with members of the Board of Supervisors; Circuit and Chancery Clerks and staff; Chancery Judges Dorothy Colom, Kenneth Burns and Jim Davidson; and several local attorneys.

“They are in business and they are accepting filings and scheduling court and motions,” Chief Justice Waller said. “I want to congratulate Chancery Clerk Russell Turner and Circuit Clerk Deborah Neal for making extraordinary efforts to have their offices fully open to the public, and I wish to thank the Board of Supervisors, particularly President Pat Cummings, for making the resources available and fully supporting the court system of Webster County.”

Help has come from local citizens and officials, from across the region and across the state. Local officials wish to publicly express their appreciation for the outpouring of assistance which began with the regional response of firefighters who battled the blaze, and continues daily with help lent by local residents as well as officials and individuals all over the state.

All nine volunteer fire departments in Webster County, the Starkville Fire Department and firefighters from seven surrounding counties helped fight the Jan. 17 fire under the direction of Webster County Emergency Management Agency Director Barry Rushing. “Every county all the way around us sent equipment and people,” said Webster County Deputy Sheriff and Public Information Officer Jimmy Forrester. “The firemen were working through wind conditions and freezing temperatures with sleet and snow and freezing rain.”

Offers for assistance on the recovery effort began coming in before the fire was out. “We didn’t have to say, ‘Hey, we need help.’ It was here before the sun came up,” Cummings said.

Gov. Phil Bryant and Mississippi Emergency Management Agency Director Robert Latham Jr. and area Legislators have talked with local officials about their needs.

Hancock County Chancery Clerk Tim Kellar, whose Bay St. Louis office had daylight showing through after Hurricane Katrina, spent Jan. 21 meeting with Webster County officials to share his insight about restoring government services and saving court and other government records. “He has really been a blessing,” Cummings said.

Water damaged records were removed from the Courthouse a day after the fire. Soaked records are being stored and freeze-dried in an 18-wheeler refrigerated trailer in Eupora. Representatives of the Department of Archives and History will meet with local officials Tuesday, Jan. 29, to talk about records restoration.

Chancery and Circuit clerks and Supervisors from surrounding counties have provided assistance. Numerous local governments have donated equipment. Choctaw and Calhoun counties provided high-powered light systems outside the courthouse for security. Lafayette County sent computers. Glancing around a temporary office, Cummings pointed out a computer from Hancock County, and a printer from Madison County. Montgomery and Choctaw Counties sent inmate workers. And the list goes on.

“It’s just amazing,” Cummings said. “We just want to thank everyone. There is no way possible we could have done it without them.”

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