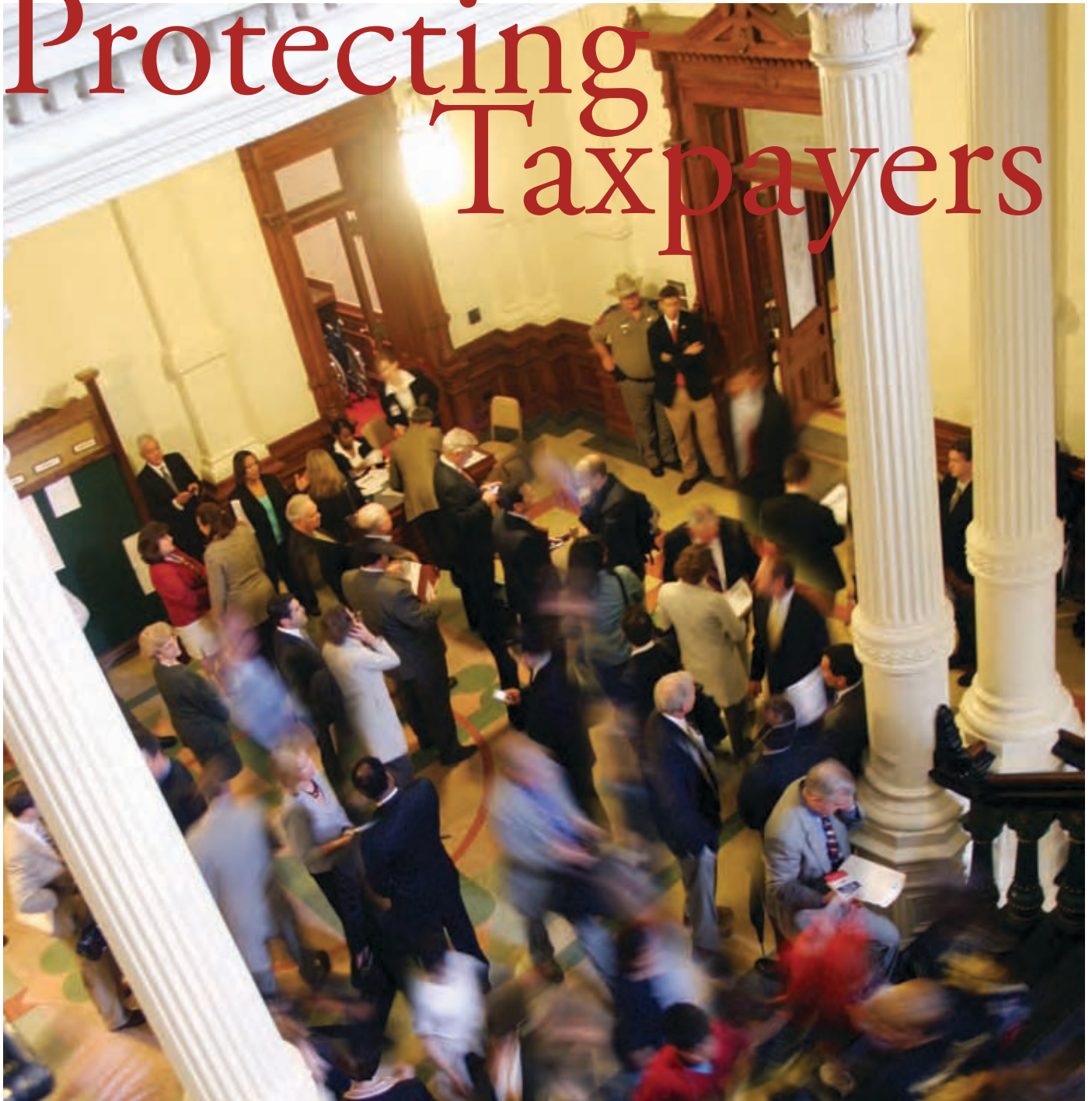


# County

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## Protecting Taxpayers





# Johnson County's New Old School Spirit

Building renovation a problem-solving dream  
By Maria Sprow / Photos by Amber Novak

The Johnson County seal is now found on each floor of the four-story building.

**J**OHNSON COUNTY Judge Roger Harmon stared outside a window in his office at the historic Johnson County Courthouse one day several years ago, confounded by several long-standing problems.

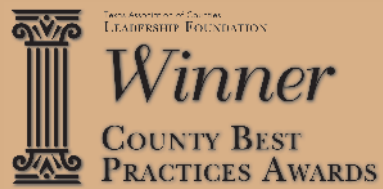
His county, located just south of the Fort Worth-Dallas Metroplex, was growing, but his courthouse, it seemed, was not. Some employees were working three to an office; desks and filing cabinets made leg room difficult to come by. Citizens were placing more and more demands on county workers, and commissioners' court wanted to hire more help, but hiring was on hold because space had become a more important resource than time. In addition, not only was the courthouse not growing, but it was aging and due for a renovation – heating and air conditioning weren't working properly, the restrooms were antiquated, more parking was needed, and the county couldn't get any funding to complete the project because it couldn't be done without moving the employees, who had no other place to go.

As it turned out, the answer to all these problems was just outside his window. The old Cleburne High School had been sitting vacant since 1999. A stately 76,052 square-foot building, the second tallest in the county seat just behind the courthouse itself, the structure was badly deteriorating, and the Cleburne Intermediate School District considered it unusable. Harmon himself had attended that high school and was saddened by its condition.

"My administrative assistant and I were just talking and I said, 'wouldn't it just be a dream' ➤



The new Guinn Justice Center was once an abandoned downtown eyesore in Johnson County. Previously known as the Cleburne High School from 1917-1976, and then to the city's junior high school until 1991, it had last been leased by Hill Junior college before sitting vacant outside Johnson County Judge Roger Harmon's office window. The building was renovated into a county annex and now houses three district courthouses, two county courts at law, a visiting judge's courtroom, the district attorney's office, the county attorney's office, the district clerk's office, the county clerk's office and a jury pool room, as well as holding cells for prisoners. An old football field was converted into a 400-space parking lot to help ease the downtown area's parking problems, and county employees now have plenty of space to do their business.



come true if we could take and make the old high school into a court building?' Harmon recalled. "We had no idea if it could work functionally. When we hired the architect, he said, 'my reputation is on the line,' and when we found this building, he tried to tell me that it couldn't, that this wouldn't work, but when he put it on paper, it was a perfect fit."

The architect, Alan McGee, was able to take the Cleburne High School, and, using a technique called Adaptive Re-use, create a new building using the existing outside frame. To do so, the interior of the school was completely gutted, while the building's front wall was supported by steel braces. Though McGee included some aspects of the old school into the design, such as the width of the hallways, the inside was completely rebuilt. What was once classrooms and an auditorium became office space and seven courtrooms, as well as a jury pool room, a sally port and holding cells for prisoners and a fourth floor atrium area that overlooks the town's historical market square.

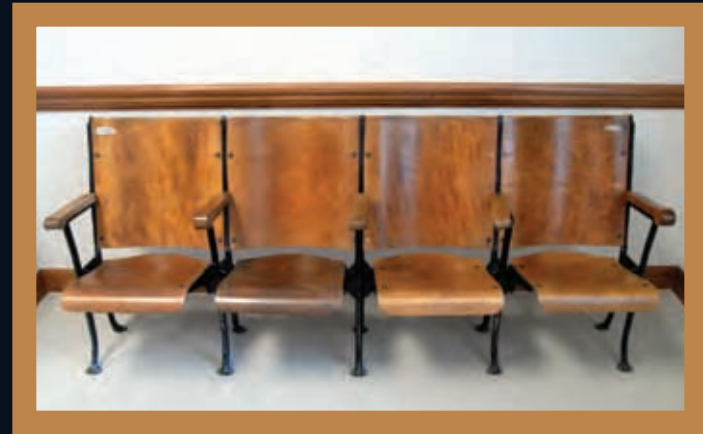
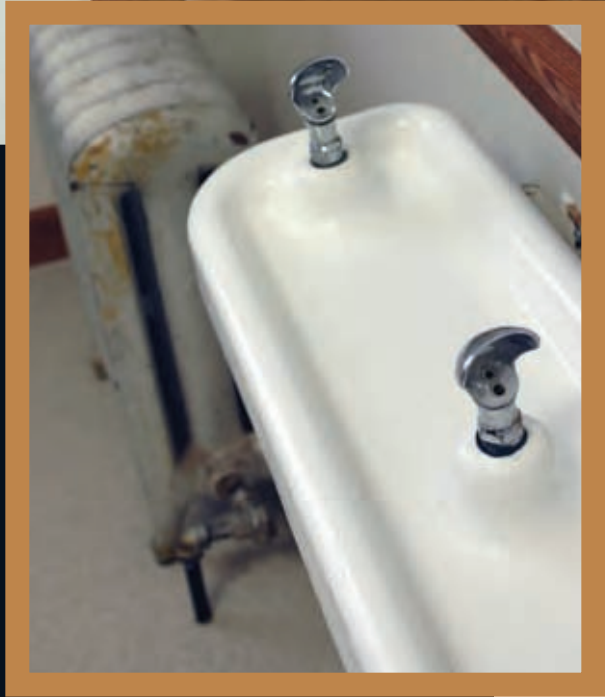
There is also a museum area dedicated to the history of the old school. ➤



While the building's original interior was completely demolished during its reconstruction -- its exterior held up by steel braces -- the building's once-dilapidated exterior was saved and restored back to its original condition, from the window pane designs to the concrete "High School" sign high over its archway. Damaged bricks and tiles were replaced, as were all identifying marks, such as the Cleburne High School logo on the building's historic pillars.



The doors to the Cleburne High School museum area are restored from the building's original interior. Inside the museum are cases of donated memorabilia, including antique instruments from band classes, photographs of sports teams, trophies and letter jackets. The building's original heating and water fountain units are also displayed.



"The school was one of just two in the whole state of Texas that had what they called a 'house system.' There were three ladies' houses and three mens' houses, and everyone from grades eight through 12 went to their house when the bell rang in the morning, and then they would go to class. It was just one of the ways that they kept up with the kids," Harmon said. "I can walk in that building today and when I look down the hallways, I still have the feeling that I'm in the old high school. We used the same octagon-style tile for the flooring, the same width of the hallways, the same doors, so it certainly has some similarities to the old school itself."

Harmon believes that not only was the county able to save some of the area's history, but it was able to save taxpayer dollars as well. The entire project cost \$13 million to complete, which included 104,000 square feet of office space and 400 new parking spaces, both in the heart of the county's downtown area.

"I think adaptive re-use, in a lot of situations, can be very cost-effective," Harmon said. "We are proud that we were able to preserve the exterior of the building. Every year we have homecoming and we have classes that come back, people who call me and tell me they want to take a picture of the building. People want to go back to their heritage and the history that they came from and take time out to reminisce about what used to be."

The renovation earned Johnson County a 2005 County Best Practices Award for Superior Innovation from the TAC Leadership Foundation. The building is now called the Guinn Justice Center. ★