

Safer, Drier, Higher...

Grand Forks County Office Building

Record flooding in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 1997 devastated the city's downtown retail and business district. Among the casualties was the Grand Forks County Office Building, which sustained about \$2.4 million in damage. Two nearby buildings, also housing county agencies, received damage as well.

County officials considered several options before choosing to construct a new building across from the county courthouse and jail. The move now brings county staff and agencies to one general area and contributes to the redevelopment of the city's downtown. State and county social service agencies have co-located in the building as well.



Grand Forks County Office Building that flooded in 1997.



New county office building, completed in January 2000, is better protected from future flooding.

Construction began in June 1998 and was completed in January 2000. Because the new building is in a floodplain, local ordinances required it to be floodproofed. So the building site was elevated 4 feet prior to construction, putting the bottom floor about 13 inches above the 1997 flood level. There is no basement. To ensure that critical components remain dry if another flood occurs, a special "penthouse" level was added across the top to house the building's mechanical and electrical systems. Additionally, the county's computer system now is on the third floor.

"We wanted to build a building that isn't going to be taken out like we had in 1997," said Ed Nierode, county director of administration. "Taxpayer money was spent to build this building and we made every effort to use that money as efficiently as possible.

Part of that efficiency is to prevent this from happening again."

From the street level, the elevation is barely visible. Mulch and landscaping between the ground-level sidewalk and sloping handicapped access ramps leading to the building's main floor provide the only outward indication of the elevation difference.

Cost of the project was about \$18.5 million, Nierode said. So far, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has paid about \$4.3 million and the State of North Dakota has paid about \$475,000—both as part of disaster recovery assistance provided to repair or replace damaged infrastructure. Another \$5.6 million in state and federal flood recovery money was provided through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The remaining \$8 million was funded by the state and the county through bonds that were sold to finance the project.



Mulch and landscaping disguise the difference in elevation between the ground level and the building's main floor.
