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Becomes a Modern Law Library

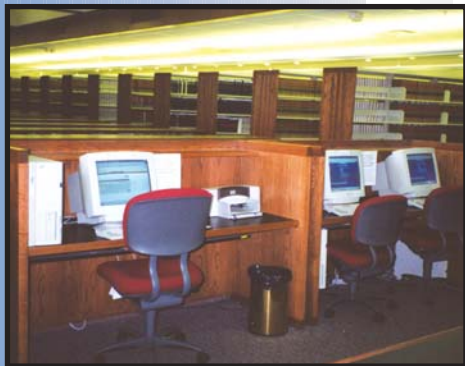
by Sandra Marz



Before: The old jail area was bland and sterile.



After: The old jail was converted into the library's new lobby.



Stacks, online catalogs and public Internet workstations provide access to legal information.

I have worked for Washoe County Law Library for 22 years — 20 of them working with the Board of Trustees on a new space for the law library. Just over two years ago we finally moved into a beautifully remodeled law library space that used to be an old jail, one of many additions to the original Washoe County Courthouse built in 1873. The journey up to that point was filled with funding roadblocks.

When I first arrived at the library 20 years ago, the facility was overcrowded: no room for books, equipment, staff or patrons. One library consultant described our old law library workspace as “Dickensian.”

So plans for constructing a second courthouse or courthouse addition included a new law library. We had three different architects, each with a different design plan, and spent countless hours on programming documents for a second courthouse or courthouse addition that included a new law library. “New law library space” appeared on every Law Library Board of Trustees agenda for 20 years.

The Board of County Commissioners finally accepted a plan and promised the law library space and funding if we raised part of the money. We applied for and received a federal *Library Services and Construction Act* grant that was in its final year of availability and was administered by the Nevada State Library. The funding had some strings attached and was less than 10 percent of the total project cost, but proved to be the glue that held the project together: If the federal government and the state library approve a grant, “sanctioning” the project, it

becomes worthwhile. Washoe County had to promise to provide matching funds and had to be reminded to do so from time to time. We raised funds from other local groups and individuals, making it a community project. Many individuals

involved with organizations that gave us funds are now eager to help us with new projects or volunteer their time for our programs.

The hardest part of the building project was getting the commitment for the undertaking and the funding. It was difficult to get a commitment from the commissioners to build a new larger space because some were convinced that everything for legal research would be online. Others wanted simply to tear the ugly building down to create a beautiful plaza next to the historic courthouse. To top it all off, the building had not been used for anything permanent since the Sheriff's Office and jail moved. Once the commitment was made and funding was in place, design and construction took about 18 months.

A library consultant and architect designed the library with input from the staff and Board of Trustees. Existing space both created and limited the design. Once demolition was complete, a large room formerly divided by office walls was transformed into a beautiful wall of windows running the length of the main reading room. The staff created a much-needed staff room/kitchen that cut into potential workspace. Some rooms, such as the copy machine room, are too small; space was limited by existing walls. However, the small copy room is still an improvement. Before the remodeling project, the copiers were in the hallway outside the library. Now we have a soundproofed copy machine room near the reference desk.

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The boardroom is used for many public programs and as a quiet study area.

The goal was to create a new functional space; we got much, much more. What used to be a crowded space that served as a social gathering place for the legal community is now a modern library with a professional image. A formal reference desk replaces the old desk, which was just a counter that separated the users from the staff, who had to work on technical services tasks when not answering reference questions. A four-person computer lab with access to a variety of databases and the Internet takes the place of a small two-person computer room with only one database.

In addition to the new lab, we added nine workstations with public Internet access and carrels with plug-ins for laptops. A new conference room hosts many public service programs. Wood paneling supplants walls painted in institutional green. A complete online catalog at two workstations supersedes the combination paper and online catalog. An organized area stores earlier reports and one-of-a-kind Nevada materials that used to be stored haphazardly in boxes in the basement.

My board chair asked me, "What will the Board of Trustees do for the next 20 years?" We will continue to partner with volunteers and offer services to the public such as:

- The Lawyer in Library project allows lawyers to come once a week to meet with public for free.
- Monthly seminars on legal topics are taped and aired on a local government channel.
- A statewide law library project for legal information referral is posted on the Internet.

The library's new image exudes professionalism. People are more willing to donate time and money to an organization that appears to be successful. Yet I do miss the old informal atmosphere, where people would just stop by to talk. But this new space meets the challenge of the future with projects made possible by professional staff and space.

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