

A Somerset landmark that has been a nerve center for city government since 1951 will be sold at public auction early this fall.

Existing Somerset City Hall at the corner of East Mt. Vernon and North College streets and adjacent Somerset Utilities Department building immediately to the north will go to the highest bidder, probably about the first of September, Mayor Eddie Girdler said this week. Somerset Utilities offices are currently housed in what was formerly Somerset Clinic at 105 North College Street.

Earlier plans to raze the two vacant structures and create parking spaces were junked. Ample parking was developed around the Energy Center and city hall, and Girdler reasoned it is unlikely customers and visitors to the new complex would park that far away and walk across busy College Street.

Somerset Energy Center and the new city hall are complete after nearly two years of anticipation and construction, and city government offices are currently moving into the ultramodern, glass-bedecked structure. Girdler expects the move to be completed by July 30 and the existing city hall and Utilities Building will be empty. Included in the public auction will be furniture and equipment not taken to the new building, the mayor said.

Nominated in the past for the National Register of Historic Places, the Art Deco-style city hall building to-be-vacated was constructed for an automotive repair shop in 1930 by W.C. "Leggs" Norfleet, mayor of Somerset between 1922 and 1946. Norfleet was a very tall man with long legs, thus the nickname "Leggs."

The late Clarence Love, former Somerset city clerk, recalled that before it became city hall, the building was used by Norfleet as a Studebaker garage and Shell service station. The structure was converted into city hall during the administration of Mayor A.A. Offutt.

The nomination form for the historic places designation points out that the one-story building features an exterior of glazed yellow brick with concrete capping at the roofline. The central bay of the building displays a prominent rectangular tower with angular streamlined brickwork. Inset into the tower are bands of structural glass.

Since the structure's conversion into city offices, the building has been altered with new doors, a fixed metal canopy and remodeled interior. A rear section of the building served as a city jail back when city courts operated, and the east end was a fire department until the main fire station was built on South Central Avenue.

Members of Somerset City Council who approved the conversion of the building into a city hall sound like a who's who of early Somerset: Varna Holt, Otis Chaney, Chester Copeland, Dr. A.A. Weddle, W.H. Cundiff, Roy E. Greene, Ira Bogle, Bob Muse, Victor Sams, G.W. Rowbottom, Ed Bugg and Clyde H. Ping.

Somerset Gas Service was the first to move into the new city hall and Energy Center, constructed by D.W. Wilburn Inc. at a cost of \$10.2 million. Girdler said Tuesday all city offices operating in leased quarters downtown and Somerset Mall have been relocated into the new building. Somerset Police Department is already operating in its modern quarters which include an emergency operations center.

Convenience for Somerset's citizens is hallmark of the new city hall. End result will be all financial transactions with the city, including taxes, water, natural gas and garbage collection bills will be paid at one city hall office in the new Energy Center.

Girdler has just moved into his spacious office on third floor of the edifice. "I'm not quite moved yet. This is a temporary desk. My desk hasn't been moved yet," he explained to a visitor.

The southwest wall of Girdler's office is glass, allowing him to look directly over downtown Somerset. Future plans call for an elevated causeway leading westward from the third floor to a to-be-widened North Central Avenue along which the mayor envisions development of energy related businesses.

"Energy is the future and key to revitalization of downtown Somerset," Girdler predicted.

Main focus and most publicized feature of the Energy Center is its unique ability to monitor Somerset's far-flung natural gas pipeline system in Eastern Kentucky, and westward to connections with nationwide natural gas transmission lines in Casey County.

The monitoring system will be able to control switches, using solar power where electricity is not available, and divert the flow of natural gas to the most profitable destination. Somerset transports natural gas from about 20 producers and 1,000 wells in once-landlocked eastern mountains. Connections to national pipeline networks give unlimited access to natural gas supplies.

Four large electronic screens in the Energy Center allow technicians to monitor the flow of natural gas in the system. Girdler said this week the monitoring system is 30 to 40 percent complete. Consultants are currently working on technical issues with switches, and hopefully by end of year the system will be 100 percent complete, he added.

Construction on the Energy Center complex began in the fall of 2014 and "... it really turned out better than I anticipated," Girdler commented. "It's a beautiful building for the city of Somerset that will be viable for next 20 to 25 years.

"I think it was time for the city to have a new building," the mayor continued. He said Somernites Cruise and the Energy Center "... are two of the most talked about things around town."



article courtesy of Bill Mardis and the Commonwealth Journal-2016