

Lawyer: Downtown exodus is already underway

By JASON SOIFER

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PRESCOTT Alex Vakula will tell anyone who will listen that the exodus of the courts is underway.

Vakula, a lawyer, said that the U.S. bankruptcy courts moved to Prescott Valley a few years ago and the federal district court is leaving for Flagstaff.

"The other communities are seeing the economic impact," he said.

Vakula is one of the spokesmen behind the Friends of Save Our Courthouse movement. The group of business owners and residents recently launched a campaign to tell people about the impact of a proposal to move the courts from downtown to a judicial complex on Sundog Ranch Road.

County supervisors and City of Prescott officials are in the midst of land trade talks that Vakula and others in the group argue would have a devastating economic impact on downtown businesses.

"The downtown is the cultural, historical and economic center of this town," said spokesman Skip Drinkard. "Maybe there is another way to do this."

Both said the people who work and do business in the courthouse help to keep surrounding businesses open with the purchases they make.

"If some of those restaurants can't survive; if you take the 1,000 people affiliated with the courthouse (and) you suck them out of the downtown, these downtown businesses are going to feel it," Vakula said.

The group has nearly \$15,000 to make its point, according to Drinkard.

"I think it will have the effect of Monday through Friday of not having business people and lawyers in our hotel," he said. "If they don't function they're just kind of an artifact."

Dave Maurer, chief executive officer of the Prescott Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber supports preserving the courthouse and the courts downtown.

"The courthouse is an important presence and we certainly would be opposed to anything that would diminish that presence," he said. "There is ample opportunity in the coming weeks and months for dialogue."

Gary Edelbrock, chairman of the Prescott Area Coalition for Tourism, said they have no position on the proposal at this time.

Cliff Petrovsky, part owner of Bashford Courts shopping center, said the businesses there depend on the people who do business in the courts.

"It's still a struggle during the week for a lot of these people," he said.

Petrovsky wants to see the process slowed a bit to get public comment, consider other property options and consider technologies that can streamline court proceedings.

"Why is there a rush to do this right now," he asked? "If you make the commitment that you are going to keep it downtown, then the property will be found," he said.

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