

Preserve America Presidential Awards
Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, statewide Texas
Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
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Program Text:

An innovative state program of the Texas Historical Commission, this project has fully restored 39 courthouses since its inception and is currently helping to restore 27 additional structures. This highly successful matching grant program has provided \$145 million to 64 counties for the preservation of county courthouses and helps revitalize communities, increase local pride, encourage heritage tourism, and support economic development. Courthouses are a focal point of the award-winning Texas Heritage Trails Program and are often the centerpiece of local historic districts and Main Street areas. Among the 254 Texas counties, at least 234 boast historic courthouses, with some dating to the mid-1800s. They include outstanding examples of Romanesque Revival, Italianate, Mission Revival, and adobe styles of architecture. So far, 117 have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and another 90 are deemed eligible.

Comments:

The jury commented that they liked the matching grant mechanism and the inclusion of technical assessment training. They also felt it was a catalyst for community development, and that it turns perceived relics and eyesores into useful spaces and recognizes historical and architectural achievement.

Texas Association of Counties Executive Director Karen Ann Norris said, “the vast majority of Texas counties own and utilize historic courthouses, which are a significant part of our state’s history and architectural heritage. County courthouses were used to attract settlers, and as construction of these buildings became competitive, the result was some of the state’s most outstanding architectural achievements. Because of this restoration program, county officials that previously indicated little interest in historic preservation are now lining up to participate in this award winning program.”

Additional Information:

In the late 20th century, most of Texas’ historic county courthouses were in a state of disrepair and were threatened with demolition and destruction. In 1998, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Texas’ historic courthouses to its list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The Texas Historical Commission (THC) and Preservation Texas made a call to action, and in 1999, Gov. George W. Bush called for the creation of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program using funds appropriated by the Texas legislature. This program’s mission and scope bring the state, counties, and local citizens together in a unique partnership to restore and revitalize these historic courthouses, not as museums but as viable working government centers, symbolic of the past and the future, and valuable heritage tourism destinations.

These revitalized county courthouses are catalysts for economic development in the business districts surrounding the courthouses. Restaurants, shops, offices and other new enterprises have appeared as a result of courthouse revitalization. As a direct effect of the first \$145 million in grant funds, the total in courthouse rehabilitations has generated 4,692 jobs, more than \$130 million in local income and more than \$177 million in gross state product.

The economic impact from the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program is significant. The state's investment of \$145 million is matched by counties who have contributed more than \$64 million toward their respective projects. The program's required local match is a minimum 15 percent of the state award, but some counties have contributed as much as 75 percent of the project cost. Most county matches are paid directly from county expenditures or bonds but in some cases, such as Red River County, the entire match was raised through private contributions.

The prevalent attitude of many county officials and local citizens toward these buildings has reversed, from widespread neglect and disregard of the resource to full appreciation and support for its preservation. Recently, Judge Truman Dougharty, whose Newton County Courthouse almost burned due to faulty wiring and now begins its restoration, told the *Beaumont Enterprise*, "It's worth it.... We could put up a flat, cinder block building a lot cheaper and faster. It wouldn't be the same thing. There is something to be said of preserving history when you can." The counties' enthusiasm for this program is tremendous; nearly half of all Texas' 254 counties are now participants in the program.

So far, 37 counties have rededicated their fully restored courthouses with the most recent rededication on October 27, 2007, at the DeWitt County Courthouse in Cuero, Texas. To date, approximately 60 grant projects are completed, five more are underway, and it is anticipated that 25 new construction and planning projects will be funded as a result of Round V in 2008-09. The THC's goal is to restore all the remaining eligible historic county courthouses for the enjoyment and benefit of all Texans.

CRITERIA FOR AWARDS

The Preserve America Presidential Awards are annual awards given to organizations, businesses, government entities, and individuals for:

- exemplary accomplishments in the sustainable use and preservation of cultural or natural heritage assets;
- demonstrated commitment to the protection and interpretation of America's cultural or natural heritage assets; and
- integration of these assets into contemporary community life, combining innovative, creative, and responsible approaches to showcasing historic local resources.

The recipients are chosen through a national competition administered by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of the Interior, in cooperation with the Executive Office of the President.