

Family law attorney Thomas E. Gay, who has practiced for 32 years and has already had several hearings in the new facility, said the difference between the old and new courtrooms is significant.

"There's a total of six tables, all with monitors. The old courthouse did not have monitors on the tables," he said.

Gay said the courtroom technology represents a major improvement.

"The courtrooms are high tech, like the Superior Court. They have now ways to link in your laptop to all the screens that are throughout the courtroom. You can also bring different types of drives to insert," he explained.

Gay also noted that the building's lobby provides more comfort for those waiting to enter.

"In the old courthouse, basically, if it was raining, you were going to get wet because if you're all lining up at 8:30, 8:35 in the morning, there's really no staging area. You just walk into a little six-by-six-foot area," he said.

Beyond comfort, Gay said safety has improved in the new courthouse.

"The sitting arrangements are different than the old courthouse because in the old courthouse, if you're dealing with abuse hearings, PFA hearings are called, the alleged perpetrator, and the petitioner were in close proximity, whereas with this building, they're going to be able to be kept away from each other until the trials are due to go," Gay stated.

He added that the larger space has also changed the dynamics inside the courtroom.

"You're not as close to the witnesses, so when I was cross-examining one witness in one of my trials, I'm a lot farther away, so you have to rely upon the microphones and the speakers so everybody can hear what you're saying," he explained. "In the old courthouse, you were maybe ten feet away from your witness. In the new courthouse, you're probably 25 to 30 feet away from the witness."

Gay reflected on the condition of the old courthouse, noting that the upgrades were long overdue.

"I think the old courthouse is also nice in some ways. It had some plumbing issues, electrical issues, heating, and air conditioning issues. It was ready to retire," he said.

Gay said the new building will also allow for growth as the county's population increases.

"Family law is, unfortunately, exploding these days. COVID has been very, very hard on marriages. I've been doing this for 32 years, and I would say during COVID, I had more clients than ever before come in, and so as the population expands in Sussex County and as the amount of, unfortunately, divorces and custody cases expand, we were really in dire straits and needed this courthouse," he added.

He recalled how overcrowded the previous courthouse could become during hearings.

"In the old courthouse, I had a hearing before Judge Ryan, that was a lady who had multiple kids, and most of them were taken by the Division of Family Services and placed in foster care or alternative care, so we had 10 different dads. We had the mother, we had the Division of Family Services, we had a case worker and their attorney, and quite literally, we had relatives that had some of these three kids, and so literally, we were standing in that courtroom versus sitting down. We're just not going to have that problem anymore," Gay said.

He added that the courthouse's digital capabilities will further modernize family court proceedings.

"This one is totally wired for everything, and so all of us family attorneys are used to having hard copy exhibits that we can give to everybody, bring four or five copies, and just spread them around on hard copy paper. It's going to be much more drive- and laptop-driven exhibits in our hearings," Gay noted.

Across the street, local businesses have watched the construction unfold for years and are now hopeful about what the courthouse will bring.

"I feel like now, since it's almost finished, there are going to be more customers, which would benefit us a lot," said Eric Mendez, who works at Caruso's Pizza & Pasta.

At the Georgetown Family Restaurant, employee Deborah Marker said she's optimistic about the new foot traffic.

"I think it's great. We're hoping for a lot more business coming out of there than we've had with downtown," Marker said.

With the courthouse now open to the public, local leaders and business owners say they are looking forward to renewed energy and economic growth in downtown Georgetown.



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