

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Officials with the Seward County Courthouse are looking to take measures to upgrade security in the facility, and the county commission took a step in that direction Tuesday. The commission voted unanimously to allow a key code lock on the back door which people can enter from the back parking lot into the courthouse. That door is located near the biggest courtroom in the building, and District Judge Clint Peterson said this is for the safety of both jurors and court employees. “We’re not looking to lock that door or control access to that door until we can control access into that portion from both sides,” he said. “We’re also not trying to control the sheriff’s department’s employees coming into that portion, but people coming out of the jail often turn and come back into that portion of the courthouse that we’re trying to restrict.”

Initially, Peterson suggested constructing a door in the back hallway near Courtroom C, and he said this would restrict access to the hallway.

“If we are able to construct this door that we’re wanting to, that entire hallway would be completely private, and the only people the jury would encounter would be courthouse staff or the jailhouse staff. Nobody else would be passing through there, so the jurors would be able to relax. They won’t be subject to some allegations of intimidation that we’ve had in the past.”

Peterson said a concern he has had for some time is access to information such as court records.

“With the situation the way we have it right now, people can walk into the courthouse to where we keep our files,” he said. “They can look at our files, and there’s no mechanism other than maybe one of the employees just noticing them to keep that from happening.”

Peterson said the matter of taking precautions is “the totality of circumstances.”

“When you have people coming into court, you want to make it as comfortable and as safe as you can, and I think the construction of that door right outside of Courtroom C right at the top of the sloped hallway really does accomplish a lot towards letting us restrict that portion,” he said.

Peterson said if a security door was installed, other changes would follow.

“Courtroom D will be used only when you have an inmate going from jail to court,” he said. “You can take him straight across the hall into Courtroom D. Nobody sees him. If there are family members or people in the community that want to go down to the courtroom to see one of these hearings, they can be escorted down there, but it just really doesn’t happen very often that people want to see the types of hearings we’re doing.”

Peterson said Courtroom D would be used primarily for hearings where there is little notice such as first appearances.

“The evidentiary hearing will be more utilized in Courtroom A, B and C, and we’ll stop using D as a primarily evidentiary courtroom,” he said. “That will enable us to control the access into that hallway a lot better.”

County administrator Mary Bloomer said she has done some research into installing doors at the courthouse.

“I had talked with maintenance, and if we do end up doing the three doors, if you have a key card, this would be the single way for them to get in rather than key,” she said.

Peterson said his primary concern is getting a locked door in the hallway near Courtroom C.

“If we can’t have the construction of the door, we’d like to consider some locking mechanism on the two existing doors so we still restrict the access to those back two hallways,” he said.

Bloomer said the commission could look at the measures for courthouse security as early as next month.

“When the board does approval for their capital improvement plan in February, if the judge was available, the judge could go over there and actually talk about the options and look at them with the judge prior to the approval of CIP,” she said.

Bloomer said the cost of the two doors was about \$12,000.