

Law Shift

OCU Law School plans to move Downtown after purchasing the old Central High School building for \$10 million

To remedy its problem, Devon constructed a \$750 million headquarters Downtown. OCU Law found its answer in the former Central High School, which it purchased for \$10 million in December. The law school currently occupies about 110,000 square feet in four buildings on the OCU campus. The new building has 177,296 square feet.

“For several years, the university and the law school have been looking for a location in the heart of Downtown Oklahoma City,” says OCU Law Dean Valerie Couch. “Just being all under one roof is going to be wonderful for us.”

In 2009, before Couch came on board, law-school officials eyed the former Fred Jones manufacturing plant at 900 W. Main. That deal did not come to fruition. In late 2012, the university made a purchase offer beating the Oklahoma City Public Schools to the punch to buy the old high school building at 800 N. Harvey. Their \$10 million offer was accepted by the owner, American Farmers and Ranchers Mutual Insurance Co., and approved by OCU’s board of trustees.

The 1910 building was purchased by Southwestern Bell in the 1980s and converted to office space. It was once a school, and Couch says she can’t wait for it to be a place of education again.

“We will be returning this building to its original purpose,” she says.

OCU officials still are working out the logistics of the move, such as renovations from office space back to classroom space,

and the addition of courtroom and clinic space, while also making it a venue for community and university meetings and events. Couch says renovations likely will cost around \$6 million to \$7 million. Farmers and Ranchers has the option to stay for two years, but the university is beginning its renovation plans.

"We're in the process of trying to estimate that more carefully now that we have access to the building," Couch says.

The law school will begin moving over the next two years. OCU President Robert Henry is not knocking on the current law school's door with an eviction notice, but says opening up that space on the OCU campus will allow other departments to grow.

"Not only will relocating the law school give OCU a dynamic presence Downtown, it also provides us an opportunity to expand on-campus resources for undergraduates," Henry says.

Couch says law students will benefit from being within walking distance of many law firms and courthouses, and in close proximity to the state Capitol.

"There is just such a density of opportunity in Downtown Oklahoma City," she says.

Robert Haupt, director at the Downtown law firm Phillips Murrah PC and an OCU Law graduate, says the move just makes sense.

"It furthers the relationship and the connection between students, for example, future lawyers and the legal community," he says. "And it works hand-in-hand in furthering the growth of the school and enhancement of the legal community."

Phillips Murrah offers an extensive summer clerkship for

second-year students, who spend the summer working full-time in all aspects of the firm. Haupt says many of its new hires come through that program from various law schools.

Couch says she is ready to call Downtown home in a building that's a perfect fit.

"The key to our decision was this building is big enough to house everybody under one roof, there's plenty of parking, and it's located in the heart of Downtown," she says. "It's pretty rare to find that combination."