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SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

COURTHOUSE TO CLOSE -- MOLD WATER LEAKS CREATE POTENTIAL HEALTH THREAT

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Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTO: ANNA MARIE DOS REMEDIOS -- MERCURY NEWS

A jury deliberation room is one sealed off because of potentially toxic mold at the South County Courthouse in San Martin. The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to close the facility.

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Unexplained asthma attacks. Splitting headaches. Bronchitis and even pneumonia, in people who don't smoke.

The litany of illnesses, recited Tuesday by workers at the South County Courthouse in San Martin, helped spur Santa Clara County supervisors to vote unanimously to close the courthouse as soon as possible.

The 4-year-old building is erupting in a potentially toxic black mold, *Stachybotrys atra*, which can cause adverse health effects, including problems such as those experienced by county workers. The board also voted to spend \$625,000 to conduct further tests of the moldy courthouse and to relocate employees to portable offices set up on the same site. The move could be completed by the end of February, building officials said.

"I realize the urgency of this and I want us to expedite this as fast as possible," said Supervisor Don Gage, who represents South County. County building officials said it is unlikely the move can be accomplished any sooner because about 20 portable offices have to be moved to the property and sewer and other lines have to be installed.

County officials also said that consultants have assured them that mold levels are not high enough to pose a health threat. However, 12 county workers either have filed worker's compensation claims or indicated they will do so, alleging the mold has made them sick. The county has already dismissed two of the claims. The mold was caused by moisture leaking through the roofs and windows of the \$6 million courthouse.

"I've had asthma attacks, and my lung specialist at Stanford said it's due to the mold," said Elaine Flynn, a deputy court clerk and union steward. She was one of three workers who took the afternoon off to testify about the situation.

"Some of us who have never had asthma have asthma. Some have even had pneumonia. Many of the workers have been sick."

The county has already sealed off 12 rooms in the courthouse and temporarily relocated workers from the public defender's office, the probation department and the district attorney's office to San Jose.

How long employees will remain in the portable offices depends on how badly infected the courthouse is. The portable offices will be rented for six months at a time, but county officials have estimated it could take up to two years to fix or rebuild the courthouse. New tests of additional rooms in the courthouse and their contents, including papers and equipment, are expected to be completed by Feb. 8.

Even if the tests do not show widespread contamination of the building, county officials said the relocation is necessary to allow crews to tear down walls to test interior beams that could be contaminated with mold. The courts are also finding it difficult to operate because access to some areas is limited.

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