



For the Community

Article for *The Weekender Herald*

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MOUNT BARKER COURTHOUSE TO BE LOST?

Members of the Mount Barker and District Residents' Association are concerned that rumoured plans by the State Government to restructure courts administration in the district and to operate the Mount Barker Court on a circuit basis and not as a full-time registry will threaten the future of the heritage-listed courthouse. Apart from the essential services the court provides to the community, the building is a significant historical structure that was sensitively resorted and up-dated a few years ago.

The Association has joined with local legal interests, Business Mount Barker and the Central Hills Justices of the Peace Association to raise concerns about the issue.

It seems that the Government's move is motivated by a desire to reduce expenses, but information obtained under Freedom of Information applications from the Courts Administration Authority by Dan Cregan, a solicitor at Von Doussas in Mount Barker, reveal that changing the status of the service would only save the Authority as little as \$5000 per annum and that closing the courthouse entirely would yield an annual saving of only \$49,000. These are insignificant sums considering the resultant considerable reduction to or loss of service to the community.

The Association is at a loss to follow the government's reasoning given that the number of criminal matters coming before the court in Mount Barker continues to rise and that further rises could be expected in the future given that the population of the district also continues to rise. And this population increase, of course, is the direct result of the Government's peremptory taking over of the District Council of Mount Barker's planning authority by releasing 1300 hectares of rural land for housing development – while making no provision for funding of infrastructure of any sort.

Transfer of court services to Adelaide or Murray Bridge would place an intolerable burden and expense on people needing the court's services, which include much more than criminal cases. This would apply especially to the aged, the poor and the disabled. It is a problem caused by the Government's own lack of foresight – which would only be compounded if it persists in its proposed moves.