County weighs moving historical trove to CSUF

The Orange County Archives may move to a Cal State Fullerton library. Convenience and the luxury of additional space doesn’t completely overcome concerns of some historians.

By MIKE REICHER / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
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California Gov. Robert Waterman’s March 14, 1889, executive order preceding Orange County’s creation is tucked away in the southeast basement corner of the Old Orange County Courthouse.

Built in Santa Ana 12 years later, the courthouse’s granite and sandstone walls were designed to house county records, and have done so since.

But the Orange County Archives may move to a Cal State Fullerton library, where students and professors could regularly study the naturalization records, cattle brands and other material chronicling this young county.

The early-stage proposal by Supervisor Shawn Nelson, who represents Fullerton, has rankled local historians and the county archivist. They like the courthouse, although they acknowledge its space constraints.

A third option – a separate archives center in Santa Ana – fell apart after the county purchased a building and realized it would cost millions to renovate. Now officials are considering a move out of the county seat.
"I'd like the setting to be a little more active – not sitting in a dungeon on top of boxes," Nelson said of the archives. "They need life breathed into them."

The collections are vast: from models of the Knott's Berry Farm Log Ride, to bankers boxes full of the county's 1994 bankruptcy documents. They contain both official county records and important cultural relics.

As the county ages, its archives expand and demand more space. When Supervisor Bill Campbell left office last year he handed over 200 boxes of documents – some trivial and some worth saving, according to County Archivist Susan Berumen.

“I love it here, but we just keep growing," Berumen said in a cramped passageway, between 1930s naturalization records and 1980s telephone directories.

The archives take up roughly 4,000 square feet in the courthouse, and 600 square feet in other nearby buildings. Ideally, Berumen says, she would have twice that space. How much would be available at Fullerton is not yet known.

Natalie Fousekis, director of the university’s Center for Oral and Public History, is working with an architect on renovation plans for the sixth floor of Fullerton’s Pollak Library.

The floor would be shared by her center, the university's Archives and Special Collections, and the Orange County Archives.

Until the plans are drawn, Fousekis cannot estimate the county’s interior construction costs, she said. She expects to give the county a proposal early this year.

The Center for Oral and Public History’s portion would be funded by donors and a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, while the county would pay for its own improvements – for specialized storage with humidity and temperature controls. The three collections could share a reception area, Fousekis said.

Nelson, who initiated talks with the university, estimates the renovation cost would be less than $1 million – half the cost of 433 North Civic Center, a building the county purchased in 2008 for $2.1 million.