

Monmouth County to make buildings more accessible to disabled

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Monmouth County officials are planning renovations at four government buildings to make them more accessible to people with physical disabilities.

The work will be part of a settlement to a lawsuit filed more than four years ago against the county government by Carolyn Schwebel, Middletown, and Carmena Stoney, formerly of Aberdeen.

Repairs to bathrooms and parking lots are among the changes to be made at the Hall of Records, Freehold, and the other three buildings to bring the structures into increased compliance with the federal 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act guidelines.

Schwebel, a member of the Equalizers, a nonprofit organization for disabled people, said the changes are long overdue.

For instance, none of the 16 bathrooms in the four-story Human Services Building are ADA accessible because of problems such as improper seat and rail heights and narrow stalls, Schwebel said.

"The county has known about that for years," Schwebel said. "I'm glad plans are being put in place to make these changes but I think it will need a lot of oversight. I think the county has good people

working for it but some of the engineers either don't know what they're doing or don't have the training to make the buildings compliant."

County Counsel Andrea Bazer said construction experts from both sides of the lawsuit toured the four buildings.

"They reached an agreement on what needs to be done at the various sites and are preparing a report and we will be making all of the changes based on their report," Bazer said.

Construction contracts have not gone out to bid yet, officials said.

Beside, at the Hall of Records -- which houses the main administration offices and serves as the hub of the county government -- and Human Services Building, renovations are also in store for the Monmouth County Courthouse and Agriculture Building.

The changes range from correcting too-steep curb cuts at handicap parking spaces to making "at least one accessible bathroom (being) made available in the Human Services Building, with a preference for the first floor," according to settlement documents.

The settlement with the county includes \$10,000 payments each to Schwebel and Stoney. An expert witness for them will be paid at regular hourly rates not to exceed \$5,000. The county is also required to pay other attorney and professional resolution fees.

Schwebel, who uses a wheelchair, has brought attention to a number of other ADA issues, most recently focusing on the lack of sidewalk curb cuts for handicap access on the southbound portion of the newly constructed Route 36 Highlands-Sea Bright bridge.

Those cuts are now scheduled to be installed, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation said.

When the bridge is completed in December 2010, there will be six curb cuts in the sidewalks and a dedicated bicycle path, the DOT spokesman said.

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