

THE BELMONT COUNTY Sheriff's Department moved out of the old jail next to the county courthouse more than three years ago - in November of 1996. The 100-plus-year-old building's heat system has been turned off ever since then. This will be the fourth winter that the structure has endured without heat. From the outside it still looks like a sturdy building, but we have to wonder how long it will last with such neglect.

The Gardeners Forum of St. Clairsville and the National Trail Questers have repeatedly asked the county commissioners to preserve the building - which once included the sheriff's residence - for its "cultural and immeasurable historic value." They see the property as an architectural highlight, that once destroyed can never be replaced. They would like the building to be restored and used. The Belmont County Historical Society and the Belmont County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society have also weighed in on the issue.

The other side, which in no secret includes some county officials, would like to demolish the property and turn it into a parking lot. They see a need for parking in St. Clairsville's business district and believe such a lot would make life easier for those working and conducting business at the courthouse, and might also attract shoppers for local merchants.

In 1997, the county obtained an estimate of \$246,000 to demolish the structure. That same year, students from the Building Preservation Technology program at Belmont Technical College compiled a study of the building. They determined it would cost the county between \$419,500 and \$737,500 to renovate it into usable office space, and approximately \$3.1 million to demolish it and replace it with a comparable structure. We suspect those numbers have all gone up in the past two years.

MEANWHILE, PLANS are underway for the county to rent or build a new center for senior citizens in St. Clairsville.