

# Preserving Milan's historic township hall

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5-31-2019



A crowd enters the Milan Township Hall on Wednesday for an open house to unveil the recent renovations to the historic building.



LEFT: The Milan Township Hall as it was originally built in 1876 without the clock tower. RIGHT: The township hall was rebuilt with its iconic clock tower after an 1888 fire destroyed the roof and floors

## MILAN

Milan reinvested in its history with the recent renovations to its historic Township Hall in the village square.

Township trustees — Dan Frederick, Gerald Nickoli and Mike Shover — unveiled the renovations to the 143-year-old building at an open house Wednesday attended by more than 50 people. The open house was used to thank the contractors and backers who made the work possible. “Think about a community like Milan building a structure like this back in 1876,” Frederick said. “It was a huge commitment, but they decided to build something that would last and serve the community for centuries.”

In 1888, the building caught fire, which destroyed everything but the brick exterior. The township rebuilt it with upgrades by adding a clock tower. It caught fire again in 1998 when the clock tower was struck by lightning. Today, an enhanced fire alarm system is part of the recent renovations, which totaled \$362,000 for all upgrades. “This a beautiful building full of history and I’m proud to be just a small part of it,” Nickoli said. “There are plenty of townships that would love to have a building like this.”

The renovation included the restoration of the trustee meeting room, which was brought back to its original grandeur by removing the drop ceiling, carpet and wallpaper added during the 1970s. The trustees did a lot of the work on the room themselves. “I came in here on mother’s day and the trustees were painting. Where else could you see that?” Milan resident Debbie Nickoloff said. “I don’t think you could say enough good things about the people who work to make this town better.”

Other renovations included the woman’s restroom, a new air conditioning system, updated electrical systems and the Edison statue and a handicap accessible ramp. But the most

significant project was the addition of an elevator to the second-floor ballroom. “I know firsthand how badly we need it,” Shover said. “I had a party here a few years ago and there were guests who couldn’t attend because of the stairs.”

There’s been talk about adding an elevator since elevators were a new invention, but it took the late Milan resident Jeanette Henry challenging them to add an elevator so everyone could attend the Milan Chamber of Commerce Award Banquets in the ballroom. “Jeanette took us to task and told us since we could get it done we needed to do it for the community,” former trustee Sparky Weinau said. “It’s unfortunate she isn’t here to enjoy it.”

The project got a major lift when former state Sen. Randy Gardner, R-Bowling Green, and State Rep. Steve Arndt, R-Port Clinton, secured part of the funding through a capital bill. “Large cities get a lot of attention from state government, but small towns matter and deserve consideration,” Gardner said. “What was impressive about this project was the local support ... There’s almost no other community that pours as much into its town and history as Milan.” “Think about what it would cost to replicate this building. If you didn’t make that investment you’d have to build new and you’d lose all the history,” Arndt said.

The state legislatures got the ball rolling and the rest was paid for through the township general fund and grants from the Erie County Community Foundation and Dorn Foundation. Even with the financial backing, there were still some people in the community who feared a renovation project could alter the historic building too much. “The best way to ensure the future conservation of a building is to use it. The project ensured this will remain one of the most important buildings in town,” Frederick said.

The elevator helped ensure that use by allowing caters to get to the second floor and making it accessible to everyone in the community, but it was still the most dangerous portion of the renovation. Frederick, who is an architect by trade, said if the elevator wasn’t installed correctly, it could have damaged the exterior or ruined the design of the building. But now that work is complete, residents believe it looks like the elevator was always meant to be a part of the building. “The elevator is a really big deal because people can come up here now,” Milan resident Carol Draeger said. “And I don’t think they could have done a better job matching the elevator to the rest of the building.”

“The preservation of Milan’s history has always been a big part of my life,” said Don Gfell, retired Edison Schools superintendent and lifelong Milan resident. “This town hall is important to us and the renovation will ensure it’s home to so many more social and educational events both.” The renovation project may have come to an end, but the township hall will continue to be updated to stay in use. Erie County commissioners have agreed to pay to renovate the men’s bathroom to bring it up to code. “There’s a lot of development going on in Sandusky, but it’s important to bring about improvements beyond the cities,” county commissioner Matt Old said.