

Hammers prompt review of commissioners courtroom security

By Catherine Dominguez, cdominguez@hcnonline.com Updated 3:57 pm, Friday, July 14, 2017



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

Eric Yollick, a resident of The Woodlands and a practicing attorney in Montgomery County, presents Commissioners Court members with the inaugural golden hammer award Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016, in Conroe. Yollick gave the award to the commissioners for being conscientious of how they spend taxpayer dollars. While that was a real hammer painted gold, Yollick was not allowed to carry a foam rubber hammer painted gold into the Commissioners Court building Tuesday, Sept. 6, as the security guard stopped him.



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

Shawlene Dowdy with North Atlantic Security looks at items as they pass through a security scanner at the Lee G. Alworth Building, Thursday in Conroe.



Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

Visitors go through security at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building, Tuesday in Conroe.

The Montgomery County Sheriff's Office is reviewing security operations at several county buildings in response to some members of Commissioners Court questioning Sheriff Rand Henderson about audience members bringing hammers into the Alan B. Sadler Administration Building in Conroe.

Since Aug. 23, 2016, about a dozen hammers have been cleared through security and brought into Commissioners Court on the fourth floor and used as props during citizen comment. In fact, The Woodlands-based attorney Eric Yollick threatened to sue the county in September after security guards refused to let him in the building with a foam hammer just weeks after he initially was allowed to bring a real hammer into the building to present to Commissioners Court members and other county employees. Since then, security officers have allowed the hammers.

During the court's Tuesday meeting, two individuals each brought a hammer to court, prompting concern from Precinct 2 Commissioner Charlie Riley. "Are these real hammers?" Riley asked at the end of the meeting. "How are they getting in here; painting them real pretty gold and putting a ribbon around them?"

Henderson told the court that hammers are not prohibited items per policy. Riley appeared surprised, and Henderson said it is something that could be reviewed. "What are you going to do when somebody paints a gun and brings it in here," Riley asked. "It's going to happen." MCSO Capt. Bryan Carlisle said one factor regarding what is brought into the commissioners courtroom is intent. "Once we can sit down and get some guidance, and some guidance from the state, we will have a better idea," he said. "What is the intent of a hammer? Is it a prop or is there malicious intent behind it,"

MCSO officials are reviewing how other jurisdictions are handling similar situations. During the court's May 23 meeting, Henderson said his office already was reviewing security operations in light of the court's approval of a new contract for those services. The court approved a contract with North Atlantic Security for security services at \$14.98 an hour and

\$18.73 for overtime. That is less than the county's previous contract with Security On Site at \$16.51 per hour and \$20.93 for overtime. North Atlantic's contract was effective June 1.

The multi-use factor

While concerns over what items are allowed through security have surfaced, the court has continued to debate the location of the security station on the first floor of the Sadler Building, which houses all county administrative offices and the commissioners courtroom. During the court's May 23 meeting, commissioners asked Henderson to review whether the security station could be moved to just outside Commissioners Court, enabling individuals to legally carry throughout the building, except when entering the courtroom. "We are considering moving the metal detector upstairs to utilize whenever court is in session or is being used for another court function," Carlisle confirmed Thursday.

The county added the security station at the Sadler Building in early 2016 following legislation allowing for the open carry of firearms in the state. Governor Greg Abbott signed House Bill 910 into law in June 2015. The law authorizes individuals to obtain a license to openly carry a handgun in the same places that allow the licensed carrying of a concealed handgun with some exceptions. A separate license will not be required to open carry and individuals who currently hold a concealed handgun license will not be required to attend additional training.

In 2012, Commissioners Court agreed to allow only employees who are licensed to carry a concealed firearm with them on county property. Employees are prohibited from open carry in county buildings. The law allows for private businesses to prohibit the open and/or concealed carry of firearms per the proper signage.

According to Texas law, guns are prohibited in buildings where municipal, state and federal courts do business. However, there has been some debate regarding multiuse buildings. According to County Attorney J D Lambright, concealed and open carry is allowed in the Sadler Building but not in the commissioners courtroom. Carlisle said the revised policy will be brought back to court at a later date.