



[TRIBUNE Staff Photo]

Custom-made 10 by 18 foot carpet in reception area of data processing center on 7th floor of County Building. Rug was installed at a cost of \$1,400 during recent remodeling.

# Amid Luxury, County Aides Contemplate More Taxes

The custom-made area rug could be one of the most lavish items a county agency will purchase before the massive renovation of the County Building is complete.

And it is something few members of the public ever will see.

It is done in a stunning abstract pattern of bleached white, Bahama blue, and Chinese red, and it cost the equivalent of the yearly property taxes on three \$30,000 homes.

Yet when the County Data Processing Department decided to treat itself to the eye-catching ornament, no one bothered to determine its price before ordering it woven from a decorator's original design.

## \$1,404 for a Rug

The 10-by-18-foot carpet cost \$1,404, topping off the department's purchase of \$101,000 worth of furnishings.

Such extravagances have gone virtually unchecked during the refurbishing project,

## Task Force Report

The Cook County Board is faced with a budget crisis this year, and one of the reasons is that thousands of dollars were spent on lavish new furnishings for the County Building. This is the second in a Tribune Task Force series on financial waste in county government. It was compiled and written by Task Force director George Bliss and reporters Philip Caputo, William Currie, William Jones, and Pamela Zekman.

despite continual threats that real estate taxes may soar higher and higher to support county government.

With the advice of interior decorators hired by department heads to select and coordinate furnishings, the County Building is slowly being transformed into a lush showcase of public offices.

## "Good Sense" Rules

There has been little or no control over the spending spree. Each department head has been allowed to select his own furnishings without restriction, according to Michael

Igoe, County Board secretary and the coordinator for the facelifting project.

"We left everything up to everyone's good sense," said Igoe. "After all, they are elected officials and responsible to the public."

Evidence of how seriously county officials have taken this responsibility can be seen in their total ignorance of the prices of individual items of furniture they ordered. Even records in the County Purchasing Department failed, with few exceptions, to contain item-by-item details of costs.

It was only after an exhaustive investigation that TRIBUNE Task Force reporters and Better Government Association investigators were able to piece together a detailed accounting of expenditures so far.

## No Austerity Evident

The lax control over expenditures has permitted county officials to surround themselves with thick-piled, all-wool carpeting; solid oak furniture made by some of the finest manufacturers, and expensive accessories that in some cases

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# County Ignores Tax Crisis, Splurges on Redecorating

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were ordered by interior decorators without the knowledge of officials.

Even the freewheeling method of retaining the decorators is evidence of the haphazard control over the cosmetic improvements. Each department head has been allowed to negotiate his own terms for paying his decorator.

Igoe's decorator for the county commissioners' offices and the board room originally asked for a 10 per cent commission, but was negotiated down to a 6 per cent fee. The same decorator, however, secured her 10 per cent asking price from the Data Processing Department. The assessor's office paid another decorator a flat fee of \$3,000 for her services.

## Rug Had to Be "Just Right"

It was one of these decorators who designed an original pattern for the data processing area rug after department heads spent weeks futilely searching for a carpet that would be just right for the reception area of the computer operations center.

A rug was needed, the decorator said, that would pull together the patterned draperies and the red, white, and blue color scheme of the offices, a color scheme selected to go with the agency's red and white computers. Nothing could be found in a ready-made carpet that pleased her clients.

The striking carpet is now adorned by four flaming red, ultramodern "swan lounge chairs" which cost \$254 each and a \$299 glass and chrome magazine table.

Wall-to-wall, all-wool carpeting worth \$17,169 graces the corridors and general offices of the Data Processing Department, giving it the appearance of an executive suite in a multimillion-dollar corporation.

## Esthetics, Not Utility

Officials explained that the carpeting was needed to cut down noise in the key punch room, but gave only esthetic reasons for blanketing corridors and hallways with the luxury item.

Scattered around the spacious quarters are elaborate furnishings, including such items as 25 birchwood stacking chairs costing \$45.52 each, 14 tufted upholstered conference chairs purchased for \$231 each, and a \$467 walnut conference table.

In the roomy office of department director Stanley Wojcik the regal blue carpeting blends with a \$233 matching leather-tufted executive chair. He also has two blue upholstered armchairs that cost \$242 each and a \$593 leather sofa.

## \$40 Palm Trees

The decorator's scheme included a botanical touch, two dozen artificial plants. Sprouting from almost every corner are \$40 palm trees, \$24 giant philodendron, \$35 sumac trees, and a \$41 tree dripping Spanish moss.

More than \$575, or the approximate amount of property taxes on an average Cook County home, was paid for this indulgence, which, Wojcik explained, was needed "to break things up a little."

Another forest of artificial plants became a source of great controversy in the county commissioners' office when 23 trees arrived unexpectedly with the rest of the furnishings.

Igoe, who approved the furniture purchases for the 5th floor offices, said he knew nothing of the order for artificial trees until they appeared with the other office accessories. He had asked the decorator what the accessories included, before approving the purchases.

## A Tree Is an Accessory?

"She [the decorator] told me accessories included things like ashtrays and other doodads and that they amounted to nothing. What a shock when all those trees were delivered. I thought I was being buried or something. It was a forest of trees, and they were awful. I didn't know accessories included a bunch of fruit trees," he said.

Half of the trees were sent back, Igoe said. "I wouldn't have them in my office, but some of the commissioners liked them."

Igoe also supervised the \$58,607 creation of the new oval County Board room, a lavish conglomeration of velvet draperies, sculptured wood desks tortoiseshell leather accessories, and a ceiling ablaze with lights.

## Igoe Skeptical of Velvet

When the County Board meets, the 16 commissioners sit on tomato red velvet-tufted tub swivel chairs which cost \$236 apiece. The chairs and draperies are done in luxurious

cotton velvet priced at \$10.40 a yard.

The use of velvet rather than cheaper fabrics known for durability aroused skepticism in Igoe when first suggested by the decorator, and he insisted that she submit a memorandum explaining the desirability of the material.

In the memo, she lauded the use of velvet over other alternatives because "velvet, like a fine piece of wood or leather, becomes more handsome with age. It mellows and takes on a natural luster which makes it more beautiful."

The plush chairs and \$4,116 sculptured wood commissioners' desks rest on a red, yellow, and blue loop patterned carpet that was included in the general contractor's contract. However the original carpet allowance of \$3,000 was not enough to pay for the carpet because the colors had to be specially ordered, and an additional \$1,400 was added to the price.

Not even the smallest items in the board room escaped the commissioners' extravagance. Trash is tossed in six \$22.40 tortoiseshell leather wastebaskets trimmed with antique brass and cigarettes are crushed in 10 matching ashtrays which cost \$18.60 each.

## Strange Place for Lecture

It was in this board room that County Board President George Dunne criticized the independent Health and Hospitals Governing Commission for spending \$95,000 to furnish and equip two new departments which had no furniture.

"What was wrong with the old stuff?" Dunne asked Dr.

James Haughton, executive director of the governing commission.

County department heads who splurged on expensive furnishings for their offices were not subjected to such a grilling.

Not a single question was asked of P. J. Cullerton, county assessor, about the \$20,708 he spent just to furnish the executive area of his new offices. Nearly half of this amount was spent on Cullerton's private quarters, a plush room of carved wood cabinets and bright green patterned carpeting.

## \$7,183 for Carpeting

Dunne himself spent \$7,183 to buy 600 yards of all-wool carpeting for his private offices, nearly twice the amount spent by the Hospitals Governing Commission to buy 780 square yards of carpet for several offices, including Haughton's. Dunne's carpet cost \$11 a square yard compared with the \$6-a-square-yard carpet purchased by the commission.

And Cullerton's furnishings in his private office cost nearly three times the amount paid to furnish Haughton's office.

It is in this office, from behind his new \$973 executive desk, that Cullerton directs the tax assessments of county property owners. According to his decorator, he needed a new desk because the old desk was so out of date that additional matching furniture could not be obtained unless it was specially made. The desk was still serviceable, however, as evidenced by its present use by a top Cullerton aide.

Light is provided for Culler-

ton by a \$68 desk lamp of antique brass candlesticks. He sits on a \$422 chair covered with French corduroy and stores papers in a \$919 credenza which stands beside the desk. A \$1,377 carved-wood, lighted cabinet with grill-work doors takes up nearly half of one long wall.

Opposite the desk is a sitting area which combines a \$499 black leather sofa, two bright green armchairs costing \$296 each, a \$181 lamp table, a \$245 book table, and two \$170 lamps with white fishtail bases.

The elegant atmosphere is accentuated by a pair of \$202 brass-studded "Bank of England" armchairs in ebony Naugahyde and three olive Naugahyde "cockfight" chairs costing \$208 each.

## Aide Has \$310 Chairs

In an adjoining office, Cullerton's chief deputy assessor, Thomas Tully, has selected a more sedate decor of blacks and browns. His furnishings include two \$310 welt-trimmed chairs, four \$258 antique black Naugahyde chairs with nail trim, one \$208 Naugahyde "cockfight" chair and a \$68 desk lamp of brass antique candlesticks.

The assessor sacrificed some exorbitant accessories because Tully feared their inclusion in the office might have sparked a scandal. The items were delivered with the rest of the furniture last month, but were immediately shipped back after Tully noticed the price tags for the first time.

"The truth is no one really ever looked at what the decorator had ordered," Tully explained. "When I saw those

things and what they cost, I just shipped them right back. We don't need another Gov. Stratton."

The reference was to the former governor's purchase of a

\$90 wastebasket which touched off a scandal years ago.

Tomorrow: County government wastes \$1 million a year on patronage workers in skilled trades.