

High-Profile Courthouse Bird Spike Architectural Interest

By R.W. Delaney, Business Writer

The issue of the birds reached a visible climax in 1988. A cornice was pulling away from high atop the old Butler County Courthouse in Hamilton, Ohio, 23 miles north of Cincinnati. When the maintenance crew removed the cornice, recalls Dick Law, Purchasing Director of Butler County, "there were 300 pounds of bird feces."

The old courthouse was designed in traditional fashion, adorned with many ornamental ledges, where the infestation of roosting birds had been going on for decades. "Conditions were deplorable," Law emphasizes. "Bird droppings were a foot thick on some ledges," he adds. And the mess behind the cornice generated immediate negative television news coverage and questions about health issues. There was talk of histoplasmosis, a serious bacterial infection that could infect workers and visitors. "A couple of courthouse employees were later diagnosed with the disease," Law confirms.

"It was a major problem," continues Law. "We assured news reporters that we would look into the issue and take care of it." And they did.

Good Solution – But Costly and Unbecoming

In 1989, at a cost of \$85,000, Butler County installed metal spikes to discourage birds from landing and roosting on the courthouse ledges and elsewhere on the architecture. While this made practical sense at the time, it certainly was not an aesthetically attractive solution. To some people, the highly visible metal prongs made the building look more like a fortress or a prison than a distinguished public structure.

So in 1997, when the County Commission decided that the courthouse needed to be refurbished, the architects insisted that the unattractive metal be removed. Dick Law greeted this news with alarm.

"I warned them that this could mean trouble with birds." He could envision the return of starlings, turtle doves, and sparrows that had previously inhabited the square city block occupied by the courthouse and its coterie of fine old trees. He remembered too keenly the Good Old Days when the sky turned black with birds returning from their daily feeding grounds to roost for the night in the trees and on the landmark courthouse. He could imagine the buildup of unsightly droppings that had plagued the courthouse before. With the former metal spikes removed, he feared the reoccurrence of birds and of bird droppings landing in people's hair -- not the image he wanted to perpetuate at Butler County Courthouse.

Fighting Back. Out of Sight.

Law had read about a better solution to bird nuisances in a trade publication, and he contacted Bird-X, Inc. in Chicago. "Bird-X offered clear, hard plastic spikes that would not detract from the courthouse's appearance," he explains. "The company sent me a sample strip of the transparent spikes, which I put in the freezer for three days to test. There was no breakage," he states. He felt sure that the spikes would hold up against Ohio's "deep freeze" Midwestern winters.

"I ordered the product -- 11,000 linear feet of spike strips to cover every ledge on all floors of the four-story courthouse, its four ornate porticos, and under the round windows," he itemizes.

Professional contractors installed Bird-X Spikes® Needle Strips in about two weeks, using a cherry picker to apply the adhesive and place the strips. The cost was far less than that of the original aluminum ones used in 1988 -- under \$35,000 in total, including purchasing Bird-X Spikes, cleaning the exterior of the courthouse, and installing the spikes.

The clear plastic spikes project upward and outward from the base strip at various angles, creating a dense vertical barrier to deter birds. The spiked shafts block birds and also cause a "discomfort factor" akin to humans walking on nails. Yet the spikes are not lethal to birds. They are environmentally safe, ecologically sound and, in the case of Butler County Courthouse, architecturally accepted and aesthetically unobtrusive.

Hotels Barred.

The results were immediate, Law says. The returning birds stopped using the courthouse ledges as landing strips. "Bird-X



Spikes are absolutely the best value for the tax dollar," says Law, who has been in the purchasing profession for 11 years with the county, and with General Motors for 37 years before that. Only the four portico sections need a supplementary measure such as netting to keep the birds from infiltrating.

"Older cities with ornate buildings need to address the problem of birds," Law urges. "Don't wait," he cautions. "Lawsuits can be ugly if someone gets the disease, histoplasmosis."

He's not keeping the secret of the County Courthouse success to himself. He has spread the word among other professionals through the Ohio State Purchasing Association, and he is telling local proprietors in town who have inherited the displaced birds that vacated the courthouse.

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