

Lack of space causes court backlog

DN 3-2-94

By MARK BIRCH

A BACKLOG of jury trials in New Plymouth is causing concern — but additional courthouse rooms won't be provided until funds are available.

"We still have a lot of trials waiting, far more than I would like," said courts registrar Val Harrison yesterday.

"At the moment we have some difficulties in getting the list down to what I call manageable proportions."

The insufficiency of rooms was a major contributor to delays.

"But the courthouse was never designed for this volume of cases. It was quite adequate for 20 years, but then society changed."

Also concerned about cramped conditions is Senior Sergeant Doug Geraghty,

who said there should be separate areas for witnesses, complainants and defendants.

At present they all had to wait in the same area.

Many witnesses and complainants were upset, he said. "There should be a separate area for witnesses where they can sit in comfort and wait to be called without feeling intimidated by the alleged offenders and their associates."

Regional courts manager Eric Franklyn (Palmerston North) said he was pursuing prospects for an extra courtroom and ancillary rooms.

"But financial constraints come into the picture, and I don't know if the department will have funds available to do it within the rolling 10-year programme."

The proposed revamp of facilities had

been set down for consideration for 1995-96, but would not necessarily go ahead then. "There are various scenarios. We could extend the present building, or redo the interior, or obtain leased premises, or establish other premises off-site. And none of these things has been costed."

Whether additional rooms could be incorporated on the present site would depend on those alternative scenarios and also on future jurisdictions.

"If we go away from the Privy Council, as is being considered, that could alter the way we provide our services."

"There are advantages in waiting until the picture becomes clear, but then again you could wait for ever."

Mr Franklyn said New Plymouth's backlog was comparable to those in other parts of his region, which stretched from

Hawke's Bay to Taranaki and included Wanganui and Palmerston North.

Mrs Harrison said fewer than 20 New Plymouth high court trials were waiting, but in the district court there were about 30. "We can usually cope with trials within the year that people are committed for trial, but people may be committed early in the year and not dealt with until much later in the year."

New Plymouth's courthouse incorporates one full-size courtroom, a second which is too small to incorporate a jury box, and a third which is little more than a large office. As well as jury trials, these three rooms must also accommodate non-jury high and district court cases, and Family Court and Disputes Tribunal sittings.

At present, said Mrs Harrison, two jury

trials could not run simultaneously. For that to happen, another full-size courtroom would be needed in addition to rooms for juries, judges, witnesses and interviews.

Mr Franklyn said Justice Minister Doug Graham had suggested night courts to help reduce backlogs.

"I haven't really considered it, because as I understand it he is suggesting one particular court for a trial," said Mr Franklyn. "There are points for and against night courts. There has to be a lot of examination of the way they would operate, and security requirements. And if the courthouse were open for one purpose, there could be public demand that it be open for all purposes, and that opens up a different scenario from what the minister has suggested."