



## Cuyahoga County plans to sell administration building, buy or lease new space

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By **Laura Johnston, The Plain Dealer**

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald wants to sell the County Administration Building, moving those and other offices into a consolidated complex, all within two years.

"Hopefully we can do several things at once," FitzGerald said in a phone interview last week. "We can become more efficient, more customer-friendly. ... It would be an asset to the med mart and can pay for itself."



Joshua Gunter, Plain Dealer File

Cuyahoga County Administration Building, photographed from Lakeside Avenue, looking south.

The recommendation to sell and move came from a 90-day study of 66 buildings the county owns and leases.

Allegro Realty Advisors Ltd., which led the **study**, the county paid \$220,000 for, recommended eliminating 22 buildings to save \$91 million. The study's Dec. 28 report advised selling the administration building, the **Ameritrust complex** and the former juvenile court, as well as terminating a lease for the engineer's office at the Stonebridge development on the West Bank of the Flats.

Federal charges say developer K&D Group furnished previous county officials with limousine rides and a free condominium for personal use in return for getting the engineer's lease.

The study recommended the county invest \$35 million in 22 other properties, including the Justice Center, Lakeside courthouse and Whiskey Island. The remaining 22 buildings are in limbo.

The plan is the county's first comprehensive look at real estate.

"The county did not have an ongoing system to track what properties we had and what our costs were," FitzGerald said. "It was really a disorganized mess that is now starting to take shape as a result."

The 57-year-old administration building at the southeast corner of Lakeside Avenue and Ontario Street downtown now juts into the site of the \$465 million, taxpayer-financed **medical mart and convention center**, set to open next year.

County Council in June saw rough sketches of how the convention center could one day expand to the administration building. The site could accommodate a 60,000-square-foot-footprint, whether for more convention meeting rooms or a hotel, and could link to the medical mart next door, perhaps via a raised bridge.

FitzGerald said developers have expressed interest. He plans to quickly request proposals for buying or leasing a new county complex and seek bids for buildings up for sale. FitzGerald also wants County Council to weigh in.

"Time is of the essence, in terms of seeing if we can get a deal for that property," he said.

Taxpayers spent hundreds of thousands of dollars this year to renovate the administration building for the new charter government, the executive and 11-member council that replaced the traditional three commissioners and other elected officials.

Taxpayers also continue to pay for the Ameritrust complex, which commissioners bought in 2005 and in which the county has sunk \$44 million. Commissioners imagined a gleaming new headquarters for county government in the complex, which includes a 28-story tower, historic rotunda and cluster of surrounding buildings that once housed a bank. But a lack of money in 2007 forced them to scrap those plans.

Taxpayers continue to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in Ameritrust maintenance, according to county records.

County government likely won't move in, though. Experts say the tower's floors are too small for modern office space.

FitzGerald said he is open to buying or leasing. The process to decide, he said, will be public.

"We'll look at what's out there," he said. "Especially in the wake of the Ameritrust fiasco, it has to be something that makes sense. It's going to have to be defensible in public."

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