

## DELAY CONSTRUCTION OF NEW COURTHOUSE

NORFOLK will eventually have to build a new courthouse to replace its aging one. State law gives the city little choice, and conditions in the current courthouse demand it.

But now — in the midst of a recession and facing declining local revenues and huge cuts from Richmond — is not the right time.

Mayor Paul Fraim has said he'll ask the City Council to hold off construction for as much as a year and to postpone the day the \$108 million bill comes due. It's a reasonable response to unprecedented financial conditions.

The delay will require the cooperation of judges in Circuit, General District and Juvenile and Domestic Relations courts, who have in the past threatened to sue the city over the decrepit conditions at the courthouse. According to The Virginian-Pilot's Harry Minium, the initial reaction from the bench to Fraim's proposal is one of understanding, even if it means construction won't begin until 2011.

That should make the decision to delay easier for the City Council to approve.

Sadly, opponents of a new courthouse are likely to see any postponement as an opportunity to reopen discussion on whether a new facility is necessary.

It is.

While it may be the right time to postpone building a new courthouse, it is the wrong time to reconsider building one. The politics of an election year — and the current economic climate — will provide some candidates with reason to agitate for a change of heart, but more judicious minds should prevail.

The city's court system desperately needs a new facility, and the City Council has committed to it. The council has already spent \$14 million in preparatory work. Reconsidering now would both breach the long-fought deal between the city and the judges and would likely end with the city building a courthouse anyway.

The price tag for the courthouse has risen with every previous delay by the City Council. In 2003, the facility was expected to cost just \$50 million. The price tag is twice that now, and the need for a modern courthouse is no less.

Given the current pressures, the city is prudent to postpone construction of a new courthouse if the judges will agree. But the city would be foolhardy to consider canceling it.