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KIM HAIRSTON/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

Greg Flynn, assistant communications specialist in the office of Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz, slides open cell bars in the basement of Bosley Hall.

Baltimore County jail reborn as office space

Local companies take up new homes in old cells

By Arthur Hirsch
THE BALTIMORE SUN

The new tenants at the old Baltimore County jail in Towson say they're often asked about ghosts, but so far have heard nothing — no murmurings from the solitary confinement cell, no whispered prayers from those souls stepping through the heavy metal door to the gal-lows.

That dark gray door is still there, as are many of the cells. The new tenants, though, are happy to be there, starting a new day in the life of the three-story stone building on Bosley Avenue at Towson-town Boulevard that opened as a jail in 1855.

"We love the blending of old and new," said Greg Rittler, principal of Blue Ocean Ideas, a Web design, advertising and brand identity firm with a suite of offices among the old cells on the third floor. "There definitely are people who would be creeped out by being in a jail."

A ceremony Monday morning made official the opening of what is now called Bosley Hall — three stories of well-lighted offices and conference rooms where until



Bosley Hall, the old Baltimore County jail, has three stories of well-lighted offices and conference rooms.

recently there were 34 cells and the former home of the warden. County Executive Kevin Kamenetz was on hand in a gathering of officials and business people to cut the ribbon with oversized scissors, although he wondered aloud if perhaps a ceremonial key to open an iron lock might have been more apropos.

Kamenetz said the \$1.7 million renovation completed by the Azola Cos. of Baltimore was a good example of a public-private partnership, beginning the "last chapter in the life of one of our county's

most historic structures."

The county is leasing the old jail to Azola for a dollar a year for 40 years and \$6,600 in annual property taxes, in exchange for turning a white elephant into what Azola hopes will be a profit-making enterprise. Because the work involved a historic building, the company received about \$600,000 in state and federal income tax breaks, without which the project could not have been done, said Martin P. Azola, the company president.

He and his son, Tony, became interested in the jail a few years ago when they learned that the county was trying to figure out what to do with it. Their company has been renovating historic buildings since the 1970s, recently completing work on the Bromo Seltzer Tower downtown and the Maryland Building at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore.

The old jail had not been used chiefly to house prisoners since a replacement was built in the 1950s. After an inmate work-release program was moved out of the historic building in 2006, the place was empty. Paint was peeling, and the county estimated that it would cost about \$700,000 just to seal it and save it from further deterioration.

The county didn't want to spend money to renovate the building, Kamenetz said. Because it had already been named a Baltimore County landmark, the structure was protected from demolition, said county spokeswoman Marjorie Hampson.

Martin Azola admits to an addiction to old buildings and the renovation challenges they present, but this was a tough one.

"I would say it was a hard building," said Azola, who put his son in charge of the construction that began early last year. Efforts to reshape the inside of the building were complicated at every turn by half-foot-thick concrete walls.

"We probably cut through 15 tons of concrete to create halls, doorways," while installing new steel supports to keep the structure sound, Martin Azola said.

Tony Azola said the company worked with the Maryland Historical Trust on what features of the original insides could and could not be removed. Twenty-four cells remain, some turned into bathrooms and office utility kitchens. Sections of steel bars frame some doorways and serve as wall fixtures.

Two-thirds of the space is leased by five local companies, Tony Azola said, with applicants lined up for the rest. He said the company plans to turn 11 cells on the ground floor into climate-controlled storage for wine and may open a small cafe in what used to be the old commissary.

"It's great space," said Diane L. Robinson, who moved her business, dlr marketing, to the building from an office in the city, in part because she lives in Towson. "I haven't met a spirit yet," she said, although people keep asking her about specters. "My husband keeps telling me we have to do a sleepover."

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