

Highlights of [GAO-13-263](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Rising costs and fiscal challenges have slowed the multibillion-dollar courthouse construction program of the judiciary and the General Services Administration (GSA). In 2006, the judiciary developed AMP to address increasing costs and incorporate best practices and has evaluated about 67 percent of its courthouses under the new system. As requested, GAO assessed changes introduced with AMP. GAO examined: (1) the extent to which the AMP process aligns with leading practices and provides information needed for informed decision making and (2) the extent to which courthouse projects recommended for funding in fiscal years 2014 to 2018 were assessed under the AMP process. GAO compared the judiciary's capital-planning practices with leading practices, analyzed courthouse-planning documents, and interviewed officials from the judiciary and GSA. GAO visited three courthouses selected because they were highly ranked by the judiciary for replacement, although observations from these site visits cannot be generalized.

## What GAO Recommends

The judiciary should (1) provide more information to decision makers related to how projects qualify for new construction, any alternatives the judiciary considered, and their cost and (2) impose a moratorium on the projects currently on the judiciary's 5-year plan until they are evaluated under AMP. The judiciary partially agreed with the first recommendation and disagreed with the second recommendation. GAO believes that a moratorium would allow the judiciary to ensure that it makes the best investments in courthouse construction.

View [GAO-13-263](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or [goldsteinm@gao.gov](mailto:goldsteinm@gao.gov).

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# FEDERAL COURTHOUSES

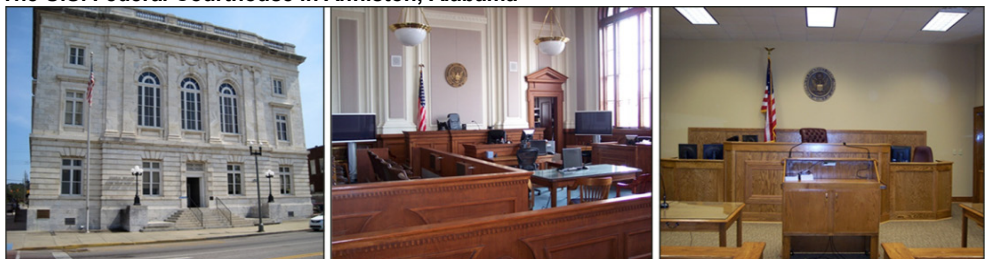
## Recommended Construction Projects Should Be Evaluated under New Capital-Planning Process

### What GAO Found

The Asset Management Planning (AMP) process represents progress by the federal judiciary (judiciary) in better aligning its capital-planning process with leading capital-planning practices, but its 5-year plan for fiscal years 2014 to 2018—the document the judiciary uses to request courthouse construction projects—lacks transparency and key information on how projects qualify for new construction, alternatives the judiciary considered, and their cost. For example, the plan lists costs for the next phase of the 12 recommended courthouse projects, which have several phases, but does not list previous funding or ongoing annual costs for the projects. As a result, the plan lists about \$1 billion in costs for the 12 projects, but the projects would actually cost the federal government an estimated \$3.2 billion over the next 20 years. Congress has appropriated a small share of the money needed for the projects, and most will need design changes before construction can begin. As a result, there is a risk that congressional funding decisions could be made without complete and accurate information. However, with this information, decision makers could weigh current-year budget decisions within the context of projects' expected future costs, spur discussion and debate about actions to address them, and put the judiciary's requests in context with other federal spending.

Ten of the 12 recommended projects were not evaluated under the AMP process. Judiciary officials said that they did not want to delay the current projects or force them to undergo a second capital-planning process after they had already been approved. Two courthouse projects from a previous 5-year plan that were assessed under AMP were removed from the list and are now ranked behind more than 100 other courthouse construction projects. Furthermore, 10 of the 12 recommended construction projects do not qualify for a new courthouse under the AMP criterion, which requires that new courthouses need two or more additional courtrooms. These conditions call into question the extent to which the projects remaining on the 5-year plan represent the judiciary's most urgent projects and whether proceeding with these projects represents the most fiscally responsible proposal. While 10 additional AMP evaluations would involve some additional costs, not conducting those evaluations could involve spending \$3.2 billion over the next 20 years on courthouses that may not be the most urgent projects.

### The U.S. Federal Courthouse in Anniston, Alabama



Source: GAO.

Note: This courthouse currently has one senior judge and one bankruptcy judge and 2 courtrooms. The judiciary recommends building a new courthouse even though the AMP process requires that new courthouse construction require at least 2 additional courtrooms based on the judges located there.