

Rat-ifying the budget

School Book Depository tenants move in

By CHRISTY HOPPE

Every once in a while, a rat has surfaced in county government. Usually feeding off the bureaucratic fat, rarely did any go nibbling on public records.

Until last week.

A band of rats evidently went prowling around the new quarters of the county budget office to inspect the latest tenants in the Texas School Book Depository building, at Elm and Houston streets.

The 4-legged creatures nibbled and poked through books and budget papers and, in one week, managed to gain the attention of more budget officials than had generations of desperate, fund-seeking department heads.

The budget office was the first

county program to move into the School Book Depository, a building that sat idle for about 14 years until purchased by the county three years ago.

While other departments will wait until late January to move into the renovated building, the budget employees have the dubious distinction of setting the ground rules for rodents and other tenants that go bump in the night.

Before poison was set out recently, the rats appeared to be winning.

An empty carton of milk was carried from a trash can into an adjoining office and enthusiastically eaten. An African violet plant was half devoured. The back of a diploma was chewed through and parts of the

county budget were cut, this time with small teeth.

"All I heard was a frantic scream from some lady over there," County Architect George Akins said.

But poison was scattered around last week, and no new incidents of rodent snacking have been reported, Akins said.

"It's an old building sitting near a field and railroad tracks," he said. "Little mice always come in where it's warm in the winter time. I don't see any big deal."

As for the county workers, they're sure these are rats, not mice, and to them that makes a difference. With the rats coming off boxcars and living in the building for 17 years, "I'll bet they're this long," said one employee, indicating a 1-foot expanse.