

A \$70 million decision

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Michael Rose, reporter

Taxpayers soon will hear the city's pitch for a seismic upgrade and redesign of the Vern Miller Civic Center, headquarters for Salem's city government and police department. The estimated cost: \$70 million.

At just over 40 years old, the complex of city offices at 555 Liberty St. SE wasn't designed to withstand strong earthquakes. The police station doesn't meet state or federal seismic standards for critical emergency response facilities.

"The way it is, right now, city employees wouldn't even be able to get out of the building alive, much less use the building," Salem City Manager Linda Norris said.

Also, the police department has outgrown its space at the civic center and must lease 15,000-square-feet of space off site.

Four years ago, Salem City Council decided to pursue a future bond measure to finance a major upgrade of the civic center. But the idea of asking voters to support a bond measure was set aside during the recession.

Now, it's back on the agenda.

The city has discussed the potential of having a \$70 million bond measure for civic center improvements on the November 2014 ballot, Norris said.

No final decision has been made about putting the bond measure on the ballot, but city officials have started a public outreach campaign. They will meet with community groups and hold open houses to discuss the new vision for the civic center.

Conceptual plans would turn the block-shaped city hall into a U-shape complex of city offices without an atrium.

The auditorium used for city council meetings and for a second municipal court would be removed because of inherent seismic hazards in its design. It would be replaced with a new standalone building along Liberty Street SE on the civic center site, adjacent to the library and city hall building.

The new council chambers and municipal court building would include what city officials call a customer service area, where city residents could pay utility bills or sign up for city programs.

One of the biggest changes: Police headquarters would be in a new three-story, 75,000-square-foot space at the civic center.

But even before the first meetings with community groups, some Salem residents have voiced concerns. They contend the public's ideas and concerns about the project have been ignored.

"This is a big investment for Salem and I think the people should have a say," said Geoffrey James, a Salem architect. For the past two years, he said, the city has worked in a "secret process" to create one design without considering other possible alternatives.

"We have a right to be part of the decision making -- not the outreach after the decision," Salem resident Claudia Howells said.

The city's critics say other locations might be better suited for a newer, much larger police station than the civic center site.

"We never had that conversation," Howells said.

City officials maintain that plenty of public outreach has been done over the years. The city had a yearlong collaboration with the University of Oregon's Sustainable City Initiative in 2010-11, where architecture students worked with a local architect to determine the city's space needs.

"I think it's folks jumping the gun and trying to stir up controversy where there is none," said Salem City Councilor Chuck Bennett.

Several years ago, the city did consider putting a police station and municipal court in another location in the downtown area, Bennett said. The idea was rejected, he said.

Other concerns brought-up by a contingent [of] Salem residents have been the project's consequences for Peace Plaza and Mirror Pond.

"Our full intent is to keep Peace Plaza," Norris said. Part of the updates could include repairs to Peace Plaza's eroded concrete, she said.

The manmade Mirror Pond, which often is covered in algae, would be replaced with a more natural-looking water feature for storm water treatment and retention, Norris said.

If a \$70 million bond was passed to finance seismic upgrades and a new police station in 2014, Salem taxpayers would pay 52 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, city officials said. For example, the owner of a home with an assessed value of \$200,000 would pay \$104 per year.

Construction likely would begin in the spring or summer 2016.