

# Salem police facility: How did we get here?



[Next Slide](#)

8 Photos

Salem's police facility outdated, outgrown

The last time Salem built a new police facility, it was outmoded within a decade.

The Salem Police Department has [needed more space](#) since the 1980s. Lacking secure space to house people in custody, officers must babysit suspects in interview rooms. Narcotics evidence is stacked floor to ceiling in a locked closet. The department has not had enough lockers for officers in 30 years.

Since 2007, city officials have tried to find a solution. The current proposal — a 148,000-square-foot facility on the site of the former O'Brien car dealership, which could cost as much as [\\$81.4 million](#) — is the furthest the city has gotten.

During public testimony on the proposal, community members pointed to prior attempts at building a new headquarters as proof that Salem can build a cheaper, smaller facility.

What were they talking about? How did the police station and the community get to this

point? Let's take a look.

## **The grand opening**

In 1972, the \$10 million Vern Miller Civic Center — which consolidated the police department, municipal court, library and city government offices — opened to great fanfare.

When the civic center was built, it was the largest single project undertaken by the city. It cost \$2.07 million to acquire the 12.85-acre campus and about \$8 million for construction, according to the dedication ceremony program.

The opening was celebrated with a parade, art show, and music and dance performances.

## **Making due**

Yet as far back as 1981, there were talks about needing changes in the police portion because the department had filled up its 26,641-square-foot space, said Chief Jerry Moore, who started with the department in 1979.

Since then, department leaders have been resourceful to make the space work. A briefing room was halved so more lockers could be installed. Bulletproof glass windows were added to the front counter. A conference room was lost to other uses.

In the late '80s, Salem stopped using the civic center's jail to house prisoners. The city moved the communications unit, now known as the Mid-Willamette Valley Communications Center, there and eliminated a secured entryway for transporting prisoners. Instead, detainees are taken from police cars to the interview rooms using the same elevator as the general public. Those moves allowed the department to build a training room where officers could practice defensive tactics, Moore said.

About 12 years ago, the 911 dispatch center was shifted into leased space off-site. Deputy Chief Steve Bellshaw said moving dispatchers away from officers wasn't the city's first choice, but they "were basically in a dungeon." The minute they moved out, the space they left behind was full, Bellshaw said.

The longer Moore worked for the department, he said, the more he realized how inefficient the space was. There's no smooth workflow, inadequate security and no separation of police cars from public access.

## **Failed attempts at change**

After years and years of discussion, Moore said, he thinks the 2007 city council realized something needed to be done. The city hired Eugene-based Berry Architects to conduct an assessment.

According to the resulting report, the department needed 225 sworn officers in 2007, but had 191. The report projected the department would need 291 officers in 2030.

The estimated square footage needed in 2007 was 116,385. With the projected growth, the firm estimated the department would need 135,262 square feet in 2030.

Currently, the department comprises 187 officers and 118 civilians, plus volunteers who sometimes work in the headquarters.

They are spread over less than 50,000 square feet, with almost half of that in the civic center. Other divisions — including the 911 call center, hazardous device team, SWAT team, crime lab and property control unit — are housed off-site.

Moore said he didn't think the Berry report "gained much traction at the time." He said he thought there was a little sticker shock with it.

"It just didn't go anywhere," he said.

In 2009, Salem Mayor Janet Taylor decided a new police station needed to be built. The aim was to get it on the 2010 ballot. It was such a tight timeline that it couldn't be done, but staff tried, said Courtney Knox Busch, strategic initiatives manager.

"We always had these discussions, but we never had a plan," Moore said.

There was a desire to keep the police on the civic center campus because the property was designed so the complex could grow. City employees recognized the facility recommended by Berry Architects couldn't fit on the site, so they reduced the size. They got the proposal down to 75,000 square feet, Moore said.

"There was really no guidance provided by an architect with experience building a police facility," he said.

That 75,000-square-foot number has come up recently in public discussions, primarily from residents wanting a less expensive option than the 148,000-square-foot plan.

Salem Community Vision, a group of Salem residents active in civic affairs, proposed an alternative: Spend \$50 million for both a new police facility and seismic upgrades to the civic center. A white paper issued by the group calls for capping the size at 75,000 square

feet, because that's the number the city recommended and promoted for years.

At a public hearing, Moore said the 75,000-square-foot estimate "was created by city employees so it's our fault that number is out there."

In 2011, Salem participated in the University of Oregon's Sustainable Cities Initiative. City officials asked students how to fit a 75,000-square-foot police facility on the civic center campus, which staffers thought was a fool's errand, Knox Busch said.

The students came back with about 30 ideas of where it might fit. The project resulted in a concept where they'd change the face of city hall, do seismic upgrades, build a police facility and renovate parking, Moore said.

With the economic downturn, the council decided not to pursue the project and a bond issue to pay for it until at least the November 2014 election, city records show.

In May 2013, the city council made a new police facility an official goal for the 2013-14 fiscal year. Council members agreed that it needed to be done right and there needed to be a solid plan, Moore said.

In January 2014, a poll gauged community perceptions on a new police facility and seismic upgrades for the library and city offices. The [results were inconclusive](#), according to city records.

When those polled were asked whether they supported a bond measure that would cover both the civic center upgrades and new facility, 48 percent said it was a good idea and 45 percent said it wasn't, records show.

Opponents to the current proposal say that poll shows a lack of support for such an expensive project, which was billed at \$80 million at the time. Knox Busch said the city always intended, later on, to do a second poll that focused less on messages and more on a concrete option.

## **Where we are now**

In June 2014, Mayor Anna Peterson [appointed a blue ribbon task force](#) to explore options for the police facility.

Two architectural firms, including the one that later was hired, told the task force that a 75,000-square-foot facility would be too small. They said it would have to be at least 100,000 square feet, Moore said.

The task force recommended that the city pursue a voter-approved bond issue for a centrally located facility that included the 911 dispatch center. Members voted to hire architects who had experience building police stations and have those architects recommend a size.

Over the course of 10 meetings, members came to an understanding that putting the police station on the same ballot as seismic upgrades for the city center would be a catch-22, Knox Busch said.

The task force unanimously decided a facility [needed to be pursued expediently](#) and the city needed to avoid the controversy of putting it on the civic center campus, which likely would have required more expensive underground parking.

Last summer, the city hired DLR Group, a national architecture firm with experience building police facilities. The consultants have designed 20 police stations on the West Coast.

Consultants with DLR Group spent weeks evaluating the needs and current status of the department, including spending four days shadowing officers and interviewing 29 officer groups.

In November, consultants recommended the city build a 150,000-square-foot facility that could last the next 40 years.

With advice from consultants and public input, the [city council narrowed 32 possible locations](#) to one: [the O'Brien site](#). At a [public hearing](#) Feb. 29, the community overwhelmingly supported putting the facility there.

The council asked consultants to prepare cost estimates for six different-sized facilities: the full 150,000-square-foot facility that consultants are recommending; the facility without the 911 call center; one with a reduced estimate of the number of officers needed during the next 30 years; one without the call center and with fewer officers; one eliminating space for any new staff positions; and one eliminating the call center and any new staff.

That range puts the projected price between [\\$70.6 million and \\$81.4 million](#).

If the full 150,000-square-foot facility is chosen, homeowners with assessed property values of \$200,000 would pay \$9.08 a month in property taxes, according to city officials.

**What's next?**

The council still needs to make final decisions on cost, size, design and funding source, which likely will be a bond on the November ballot.

Although the city council has until August to file a measure for the general election, City Attorney Dan Atchison said he'd like to write a measure by July. The sooner they're able to make the decision, the sooner supporters can form a political action committee to begin campaigning, he said.

During March, a [poll and online community surveys were conducted](#) related to the proposed facility.

The next step is for the council to hear the poll and survey results at its April 4 work session.

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## **Learn more**

**What:** Salem City Council public work session on the police facility

**When:** 6:30 p.m. April 4

**Where:** Council Chambers, Vern Miller Civic Center, 555 Liberty St. SE

**Information:** <http://cityofsalem.net/PublicSafetyFacility>