

Sides spar on proposed Salem police facility

Whitney M. Woodworth, Statesman Journal 5:19 p.m. PDT September 23, 2016



(Photo: Statesman Journal, file)

Much has been said online, in comment sections and on social media about the proposed bond measure to fund an \$82 million, 148,000-square-foot police headquarters in Salem, but on Friday the proponents and opponents of the measure met in person to debate the details and demands of the proposed facility.

TJ Sullivan, co-director of the Keep Salem Safe political action committee, verbally sparred with Brian Hines, co-director of Salem Can Do Better, in a debate hosted by the Salem City Club.

"Most citizens seem to agree that a new police facility is needed, but they can't seem to agree on the price, location, the size of the building and what it should contain," said moderator Jan Margosian.

About 100 people, including Mayor Anna Peterson, members of Salem City Council and Salem Police Chief Jerry Moore, filled the Willamette Heritage Center to watch the debate.

Almost 190 sworn officers use the current police headquarters on the first floor of the Vern Miller Civic Center, which was built in 1972. Crowding, safety, security and victim privacy are issues. A large earthquake would leave the facility — along with City Hall and the library — in ruins.

Hines and Sullivan concurred on the importance of funding a new facility and the quality of the Salem police force, but their common ground ended there.

Sullivan said the bond needed to pass in November to prevent the needs being passed on to future generations.

"Every city has needs," he said. "Healthy cities figure how to address them in a way that they can turn their gaze to other needs so they can focus their attention. It also relieves a burden for other generations."

He said the facility was modeled after Keizer police headquarters and would be designed to fit all the needs of a growing police force. He chided his opponents for using the term "Taj Mahal" to describe the alleged extravagance of the proposed facility.

"Our men and women who serve in our police department find this very offensive," Sullivan said. "You are basically saying you don't value (their) input..."

Hines disputed the need for such a high-cost, large building. With a smaller, 75,000-square-foot building, the city could put money toward retrofitting City Hall and the library or helping the homeless, he said.

"Salem isn't a rich town," Hines said. "Salem has many problems that need money... If Salem was a palatial town, it might be OK to build a palace."

In the weeks after the Salem City Council's decision to put the bond measure on November's ballot, Hines and Sullivan formed two political action committees formed with starkly different stances on the proposed facility.

Salem Can Do Better formed in opposition to what co-director Hines called "an over-priced and over-sized" police facility. As of Friday, the political action committee has raised \$1,800, mostly from individual donors like Hines, co-director Carole Smith and Salem Community Vision member Jim Scheppeke.

A few weeks later, Keep Salem Safe surfaced in support of the bond measure. The committee's co-director, TJ Sullivan, took part in the city's blue-ribbon task force appointed to help explore options for the new facility in 2014. After slow start, about \$45,000 in contributions poured in within a two-week span. Big donors included Mountain West Investment Corporation, which gave a \$16,000 in-kind contribution, and the Salem Association of Realtors, which donated \$5,500. Capitol Toyota, Withnell Motor Company and the DLR Group contributed \$5,000 each.

In the next few weeks, each side will be working to bring their arguments to Salem voters, who will start receiving ballots in the mail Oct. 19.

Hines and Sullivan addressed a variety of issues during the debate: how much growth the new facility should be built for, whether it should include a 9-1-1 call center and how much community input was included in the measure.

Each included a call-to-action in their closing remarks.

"The super-sized, full-meal deal leaves other needs in our community starved," Hines said, adding that law enforcement buildings have been built in Oregon for half the cost.

He said out of fear of children being crushed in an earthquake, he wanted action now on the civic center retrofitting.

Sullivan urged the audience to not postpone the construction of the facility and leave it for their children to deal with.

"We have the need right now," Sullivan said. "We need our community to come together."

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