

Civic Center's needed makeover

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In a serious earthquake, the Salem Police Department might be one of the first casualties. The Vern Miller Civic Center would collapse, burying the police headquarters amid the rubble.

That is one reason city officials are looking at renovating the Civic Center and constructing a modern police facility. A \$70 million proposal will go to the Salem City Council in January.

Besides being seismically unsound, the current police offices are so cramped and antiquated that it sometimes is challenging to keep suspects, witnesses and victims apart. The police crime lab is at the city's sewage treatment plant 6 1/2 miles away, which actually is an improvement from its previous quarters in the Civic Center but still not optimal.

It is a tribute to Chief Jerry Moore and his staff that the department functions effectively despite working in such awful conditions.

State-of-the-art when it opened in 1972, the Civic Center today is an unsound anachronism. The building and adjacent public library are composed of huge concrete walls, floors and roofs. That was fine design four decades ago, but building codes have progressed dramatically.

Reconstruction makes sense.

Salem officials have proposed partially rebuilding the Civic Center, including constructing adjacent facilities for the Police Department and for City Council meetings.

So far, one flaw is that officials, despite their good intentions, did not do enough to get the public involved from the outset. Civic leaders must think about what the public wants to know, not just what officials think they need to know. That requires finding new ways to reach out to constituents early on, rather than counting on them to read City Council agendas and other meeting notices.

Rumors already have spread that the project would destroy the Salem Peace Plaza and the Civic Center greenspace and that the project is wildly expensive. None of those is true, although the full-fledged design and cost figures have yet to be worked out.

Salem officials checked out a number of sites around town for a police facility. Acquiring a building elsewhere initially might be less expensive. However, it makes sense long term to keep the Police Department near Salem Municipal Court and other city offices, so officers are not wasting time driving back and forth.

Another question is whether to upgrade the city library, which also is in sad shape seismically. It is not included in the \$70 million proposal.

City residents would benefit. As currently envisioned, the Civic Center project would:

Remove the atrium roof, which is in danger of collapsing in an earthquake. Its removal also would make the Civic Center's innards more inviting to the public.

Remove another earthquake hazard, the City Council chambers, and put them in a new free-standing building east of the Peace Plaza.

The new chambers are envisioned for the second story of that structure, with a customer service center on the main floor. But given how busy the chambers are for public meetings and extra Municipal Court sessions, should they be on the main floor?

Add 100 public parking places, which are badly needed.

Construct a public safety building, with secure parking for police vehicles, at the northwest corner of the city property. The Mirror Pond would be converted to a more natural bio-swale.

Make seismic improvements throughout the Civic Center.

Reorganize city offices to make them more accessible to the public.

Potentially repaint the Civic Center and give it a good facelift.

Public open houses about the proposal begin this week. The City Council next year could decide to put a bond measure before voters at the November 2014 general election.

The need for Civic Center repairs -- and especially a much-improved police headquarters -- seems indisputable. But there are many questions to be settled along the way.