

Groups debate bond on Salem police facility

Several issues will be at stake in November: Who will lead the country, who will be Oregon's next governor and if the state will raise corporate taxes. But for Salem residents, one issue hits very close to home: a proposed bond measure that would fund an \$82 million, 148,000-square-foot police facility.

After years of review and discussion, Salem City Council voted unanimously in June to ask voters to approve the bond. Within two months, two political action committees formed with starkly different stances on the bond measure and its support in Salem.

Salem Can Do Better formed in opposition to what co-director Brian Hines called "an over-priced and over-sized" police facility.

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.

A new police station is needed; both groups agree on that. 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 incessant issues, said Salem Police Deputy Chief Steve Bellshaw. Victims pass perpetrators in the halls and a large-scale earthquake would render the facility inaccessible.

Hines and Sullivan concurred on the importance of funding a new facility, but diverging paths emerged once the cost, details and size of the building were brought to light. 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 on Oct. 19.

Their campaigns will be a study in contrast. One is likely to be well funded and managed by a group with business and political connections throughout the city. The other will probably rely on the passionate work of a handful of civic activists and a comparatively tiny budget.

Salem Can Do Better

The political action committee opposing the measure was formed by Hines and Carole Smith, two longtime gadflies at city hall. Smith ran unsuccessfully for mayor earlier this year, and Hines pens several blogs revolving around local government, businesses and Oregon politics. The committee formed in July and has since raised \$1,425.

Both Smith and Hines are members of Salem Community Vision, an organization formed in 2013 to support community involvement in local government. The group includes many of the same volunteers who worked to get repairs done on the Courthouse Square project for \$35 million less than the county was told it need to spend by outside consultants.

Salem Community Vision successfully argued against a plan to build a new police facility at the civic center.

"Whenever the citizens spoke up, it got better," Hines said.

The members of its steering community supports a police facility with a lower price tag and seismic upgrades included in the bond. They've spoken out against the \$82 million bond, which Hines said has very little hope of passing.

"None of us in Salem Community Vision feel any glee in doing this," Hines said. "The police department is doing a great job."

Architect Geoffrey James, a member of Salem Community Vision and driving force behind the reduced Courthouse Square repair costs, also served on the blue-ribbon task force. In July, he penned an op-ed piece critiquing the "bloated" bond. He said the bond would surely fail and police would have to continue working in "woefully inadequate facilities."

If the bond doesn't pass this year, Hines and Smith would like to see it resurrected with a lower-cost, smaller building, seismic upgrades to city hall and the library and more public input. Hines said the real question is: What's policing going to be 30 years from now?

Changing demographics, lower crime rates, evolving drug laws and new shifts in technology all point to a different kind of policing and a different style of police facility. A new facility should be innovative and community-minded, he said.

Keep Salem Safe

Sullivan, a former city councilor, formed Keep Salem Safe to support the measure. Although, so far, the group has reported only receiving a \$100 loan, it is backed by the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce and the Salem Police Foundation.

[In August, the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce](#) made public its support for the bond measure. Chamber spokesman Nick Williams said it assembled "a broad coalition" to campaign in favor of the bond and took part in the creation of Keep Salem Safe committee.

A chamber-supported political action committee, Create Jobs PAC, came out strongly against a proposed payroll tax to fund weekend and late-night bus service in 2015. The PAC outspent the committee supporting the transit tax 8 to 1. In the 2015 race, Create Jobs reported more than \$250,000 in expenditures versus the roughly \$20,000 spent by pro-measure committee. The transit tax measure got crushed.

Sullivan said the Salem Police Foundation is running the campaign in support of the measure, with funding and assistance by residents and organizations like the chamber.

This is a livability issue, he said, and the healthier Salem is, the more businesses will prosper, which is why the Chamber of Commerce has endorsed the bond.

"Our PAC may take in some money, but it will be passed through to this measure," he said.

Sullivan toured police headquarters while he was on city council. He recalled seeing police interviewing a woman who had just been beaten by her boyfriend. At the end of a hall, officers had to hold the boyfriend as he was yelling and threatening to kill the woman.

"That still plays out in my head," he said. "She just suffered and now she's suffering again in a place that should be designed for healing. We want to create a better facility so that never happens."

Speaking to residents about the bond has cemented his belief that the public supports the police department.

"The police officers in this town have done a great job of being good community citizens," Sullivan said. "Salem is going to get behind this."

Those opposing the measure are a small group of people. Some of them don't even live within city limits, he added.

In the event of its failure, the bond would have to go to the back of the line, behind other proposals and needs.

"If this doesn't pass, it'll be another decade before we address it again," Sullivan said. "I don't want my kids to have to deal with the police facility in 15 years. I want them to have to deal with parks and pools and museums."

The Plan

A DHM Research poll conducted in [March found about 58 percent](#) of Salem residents would support the \$82 million bond measure.

An online community survey conducted the same month found more opposition. Of the 634 people answering that survey, 52 percent opposed the measure and 47 percent were in favor.

When asked if he thought Salem Can Do Better was in an uphill battle against the chamber-backed measure, Hines pointed out that two chamber-endorsed candidates, Warren Bednarz and Jan Kailuweit, were defeated in May's city council election.

He said he expects Keep Salem Safe to raise and spend more money in the months leading up to the election but affirmed his belief in the power of grassroots campaigns and social media. Distrust in large institutions is reflected the chamber's waning power and the rise of "people power," he said.

In the two months before the election, [Keep Salem Safe](#) plans to start a social media campaign, send out mailers and possibly run TV ads.

[Salem Can Do Better](#) is working to raise money, spread its message on social media and visit neighborhood association meetings leading up to Nov. 8.

Hines and Sullivan will square off in a debate hosted by [Salem City Club on Sept. 23](#).

Stay tuned for the Statesman Journal's continued coverage of the bond measure, including a break down of different plans, a look at other, similarly-sized police facilities and what each side has to say about about the details of the bond.

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Measure 24-399: City of Salem Police Facility General Obligation Bond Authorization

Question: Shall the City issue up to \$82,088,000 in general obligation bonds for a new police facility? If the bonds are approved, they will be payable from taxes on property or property ownership that are not subject to the limits of sections 11 and 11b, Article XI of the Oregon Constitution.

Summary: If approved, this measure would finance a police facility and other capital costs. This measure would provide funds to:

Bonds may be issued in one or more series and each series would mature in 31 years or less from its issuance date. It is estimated that the FY 2017/18 proposed tax would result in a rate of \$0.36 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. For a home assessed at

\$200,000, the estimated property tax for the bonds would be \$72 per year, or \$6 per month.

Source: Marion County Elections