

Should the Salem library find a new location?



Michael Rose, Statesman Journal 8:09 a.m. PDT June 18, 2014



(Photo: TIMOTHY J. GONZALEZ | Statesman Journal file)

The lightning rod of city politics might be the public library.

At a Salem City Council work session in May, city councilors discussed a proposed seismic upgrade of Vern Miller Civic Center and construction of a new police station.

Located at 555 Liberty St. SE, the civic center serves as headquarters for city government and police. A \$80.5 million bond measure has been discussed to pay for renovations.

One the ideas tossed out by Salem City Councilor Warren Bednarz at the work session has generated a withering response from the city's critics.

Bednarz asked if the library's building could be retrofitted and become the new police station. He also suggested that the library might be able to find a better home at a new location. The concept, he said, might save taxpayer dollars compared to the current plan for the civic center.

"I've taken heat for it, but I would do it again," Bednarz said of suggesting an alternative. The councilor said he has received a series of emails asserting that the city is poised to close the library, which isn't the case.

Bednarz said his idea is worth exploring. The library has a parking area that could become a secure parking area for police vehicles; and the police station could retain its proximity to city hall, he said. Relocating the library could present an opportunity to upgrade its facilities, he said.

Salem Mayor Anna Peterson said the council was only looking at options for the Vern Miller Civic Center. Library service needs are changing, she said, and a library location closer to the central downtown area might be desirable.

City staff say it's premature to make recommendations about the feasibility of relocating the library and using that space for a police station.

"We would need a lot more information before we would even know if that's viable," said Salem City Manager Linda Norris.

The city, however, may take an in-depth look at the issue.

At its June 23 meeting, Salem City Council is expected to consider funding a study that would examine the idea of placing the police station in the library's current location.

In an email to a constituent, Salem City Councilor Laura Tesler said she supported a feasibility study. The city, she said, needed realistic cost projections.

"Right now we are sketching on the back of a napkin, and we need to be more solid than that," Tesler stated in the email.

At a recent council meeting, Tesler said a bond measure would need to be passed and a new library building constructed before the city would consider relocating the library.

Salem Public Library Administrator B.J. Toewe said the council's talk about moving the library, so far, has had no consequences on the library's fundraising efforts.

"Even if this were to move ahead, we're probably looking at five years in this building before we would relocate anywhere," Toewe said.

Earlier this year, city officials had discussed the possibility of putting a bond measure on the November ballot to pay for improvements at Vern Miller Civic Center.

Salem City Council has not advised staff on how to proceed, but it appears unlikely that the city could be ready for a bond measure this year, said Courtney Knox Busch, a city spokeswoman.

Vern Miller Civic Center

The 41-year-old Vern Miller Civic Center, a complex of city offices, wasn't designed to withstand strong earthquakes and needs a seismic upgrade. The police station is located on the bottom floor of the civic center and would likely sustain severe damage in an earthquake. Police also say they need a larger, modern space to operate efficiently.

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