

Salem police facility bond measure fails

[Whitney M. Woodworth](#)



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Salem police facility election party

After decades of debate and months of contentious campaigning, Salem voters rejected a bond measure to fund an \$82 million, 148,00-square-foot new police facility.

Initial returns remained close, with the bond measure losing by a few hundred votes.

Salem Police Chief Jerry Moore said they would remain hopeful the results

would turn around by morning.

If not, he said, they would start thinking about Plan B.

By Wednesday morning, the gap between no and yes votes widened, and the bond appeared to be defeated.

"City council will listen to what voters have said and ask: 'What are our next steps? Do we continue to try to make it our number one priority?'," Deputy Chief Steve Bellshaw said on Monday before the election.

He speculated that in the event of the bond measure's failure, the city would need to re-evaluate its next step, which could be assembling another citizen task force, coming back with a measure for a cheaper facility, trying again with a stronger campaign or temporarily abandoning plans for a new police facility to focus on other issues.

"There's always a risk of coming back too soon," Bellshaw said. "It'll be a tough choice."

In the months leading up to Election Day, two political-action committees formed with starkly different positions. Local activist Brian Hines created Salem Can Do Better and spoke against the measure. Hines argued that the \$82 million dollar price tag was too high, the proposed square-footage was too much and the city was doing a disservice to other employees and library patrons by not including seismic retrofitting at the civic center in the proposal.

The grassroots organization raised just under \$2,000, mostly from Hines himself, former mayoral candidate Carole Smith and Salem Community Vision Steering Committee member Jim Scheppke.

"Personally, I felt like I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do my best to argue for the defeat of Measure 24-399 because it fails to protect the lives of *everybody* who works at and visits City Hall and the Library," Hines said.



Brian Hines is the co-director of the Salem Can Do Better PAC. *(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)*

In contrast, the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce-backed Keep Salem Safe PAC garnered more than \$100,000 in contributions. Big donors like Mountain West Investment Corporation, Salem Health and the DLR Group donated tens of thousands of dollars.

Former city councilor, member of the police facility task force and Keep Salem Safe co-directer TJ Sullivan said he saw broad-based community support for the measure in the days leading up to the election. Keep Salem Safe's website featured a listed of endorsements of the proposed police facility.

Mayor-elect Chuck Bennett, Mayor Anna Peterson, the Salem Police Foundation, City Council and both

Marion and Polk counties district attorneys and sheriffs endorsed the measure.

Sullivan argued that the police force needed an adequate, seismically sound facility to keep the public, police and victims safe. The proposed facility could serve the community for the next 40 years, he said.



(Photo: Salem Chamber of Commerce)

The current home of the police department, a 26,641-square-foot space on first floor of the Vern Miller Civic Center, was built in 1972.

Within less than a decade, the department outgrew the building, and quarters became cramped. The police staff of 108 swelled to 190 sworn officers and 118 civilians, plus volunteers who sometimes work in the headquarters.

The crime lab, evidence storage and 911 call center were gradually moved off-site as space became scarce. The off-site locations are scattered around the city in about 21,000

square feet of leased space. Police headquarter, along with the rest of city hall, would be rendered inaccessible and deadly after a large-scale earthquake.

Plans to expand the Salem police facility have been mulled over since the mid-1990s. After several plans, including a panned proposal to raze Mirror Pond and add on to the current civic center, the city created a Blue Ribbon Task Force in 2014 to develop a new strategy. Now, more than 40 years after police first called the civic center home, voters were finally presented with a plan.

According to a telephonic survey released in March, 58 percent of those polled said they would support the \$82 million bond measure. An online poll conducted around the same time revealed that a slight majority said they would oppose the bond.

With the failure of the measure, Sullivan said he expected another task force to reconvene and make another recommendation. The delay will likely result in the loss of the O'Brien site as location option.

"I am certain the property will be sold to another entity," he said.

Sullivan expressed dismay on Election Night over the possibility of defeat.

"I'm really surprised it's as close as it is," he said. "Those supporting (the measure) have a history of wise investments in this city."

The battle over the facility was fought between those wanting to improve the community and wanting to "set fires" and cause chaos, Sullivan added.

Despite being outspent 50 to 1, Hines said Salem Can Do Better's message seemed to reach and resonate with a lot of voters. The group's Facebook posts were viewed 75,000 times, and in the six days preceding the election, almost 4,000 users visited his webpage. He said ignoring the seismic upgrades at the civic center was "morally wrong" — a belief he thinks

resonated with voters.

"Earthquake safety at City Hall and the Library definitely hits a nerve with citizens," Hines said.

He said he planned to email Moore and Bellshaw to let them know he would work hard to make sure a police facility gets built.

"They deserve one, and they need one — just a smaller and less expensive one," he added.

The lack of community involvement hurt the measure. Hines said he hoped new proposed facility will be presented in the near future, and city officials will take the lessons learned from the failed measure to heart.

"It's a victory for the people of Salem," he said.

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