Salem police deserve better than lowest common denominator

Salem has an unfortunate chip on its shoulder: No one, and no neighborhood, should have anything better than I have.

That theme has resurfaced in the civic debate about constructing a new police headquarters.

Most people would agree that Salem has a well-run, well-respected police department. There also is widespread agreement that the police badly need a new, larger headquarters. And events around the country have shown the importance of designing that facility with community interaction in mind.

An $82 million bond measure on the Nov. 8 Salem ballot would pay for that community-oriented police and 911 dispatch center.

Salem's 1970s city hall and public library also are in sad shape and vulnerable in a big earthquake. And that's where the chip-on-the-shoulder comes in.

Even though public safety is the No. 1 responsibility of local government, some folks contend that the Salem Police Department should not have a modern facility until the civic center and library also are rebuilt or replaced. That argument sounds reasonable in theory, but it fosters a lowest-common-denominator approach to civic life.

Salem-Keizer high schools illustrate that. With the exception of North Salem High and its nearby Olinger Pool, all of the high schools lack swimming pools.

Water safety is among the most important life lessons for adolescents, especially in Oregon. Swimming is an excellent lifelong activity, one that can be fostered by getting into it during school years. But every time a new high school has been on the drawing boards, other Salem-Keizer residents have opposed adding a pool – because "their" high school lacked one.

In the same vein, Salem has been unwilling to develop branch libraries with the exception of the West Salem branch, which has endured due to the generosity of the Roth family and the passion of West Salem residents.

Isn't it time for Salem to have higher aspirations than the lowest common denominator?

Ballot Measure 24-399

Caption: 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:

•Acquire a site located generally at the 700 Block of Commercial Street, NE in central Salem.

•Site preparation and construction, furnishing and equipping of a police facility approximately 148,000 square feet in size, and associated onsite parking.

•Provide space for a City 9-1-1 call center serving multiple agencies in the region.

•Make adjacent street improvements.

•Any funds remaining would be used to fund improvements to the Salem Civic Center, such as renovations to the spaces vacated by the Police Department upon its move to the new Police Facility.

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

Join us Tuesday

Who: Brad Avakian and Dennis Richardson, the Democratic and Republican candidates for Oregon secretary of state

What: Meeting with Willamette University students, the public and the Statesman Journal Editorial Board.

Board members will interview the candidates. Students and the public also may submit written questions for both candidates to answer.

When: 2 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Paulus Lecture Hall, Willamette University College of Law, 245 Winter St. SE, Salem 97301. Metered street parking is available.