

# After police facility bond measure fails, what next?

[Whitney M. Woodworth](#)

Salem police officials and proponents of a bond measure to fund a new police facility were optimistic when they met to watch election night results at the Illahe Hills Country Club on Tuesday night.

Things seemed to be going in the right direction. A poll conducted earlier this year found 58 percent of respondents approved of the bond. [A political action committee](#) supporting the proposed facility raised more than \$100,000 in contributions and the measure was endorsed by more than 60 local politicians, officials and organizations. Even opponents of the measure conceded the facility was needed — they just disputed the \$82 million price tag and the 148,000-square-foot building plans.

As results rolled in, the bond measure appeared to be losing by only a few hundred votes. Supporters held onto hope that the numbers would turn around. By morning, the gap widened. According to the most recent numbers released by the Oregon Secretary of State, the measure lost by almost 3,000 votes.

The bond measure was the result of years of work and decades of need by the Salem Police Department, which outgrew its current facility in 1981. With the measure's defeat, residents were left wondering, "Now what?"

Salem Police Chief Jerry Moore expressed his disappointment in a statement Wednesday.

"The fact that the police department needs a new, functional police facility remains unchanged," Moore said. "I still believe a police facility must be built to meet community needs 40 to 50 years into the future and sized to include

the essential police functions of an agency our size.

"The commitment of our police officers, dispatchers, and civilian staff to this community is second to none," he added. "We look forward to continuing our work to keep Salem safe in the manner I know this community has come to appreciate."

By the time the issue will be up for debate again, a new mayor and three new city councilors may have already been sworn in. Mayor-elect Chuck Bennett will end his term as city councilor for Ward 1 and begin his term as Salem's new mayor. Progressive newcomers Matt Ausec, Cara Kaser and Sally Cook will join Salem City Council in January.

Bennett said he plans to meet with new and current councilors, along with police officials and architects, to look at what comes next but added he would like to see it back on the ballot in 2017.

The O'Brien site at Commercial Street NE and Division Street NE remains an ideal location for a police facility, he said. Delaying further could mean the property will be bought by another party.

In the next eight to 10 weeks, he wants to assemble a group to reflect on reasons the bond failed.

"It's important to analyze what happened," Bennett said. "We need to go back and take a real close look. If it's some fatal flaw, it needs to be fixed."

It's too early to tell what exactly went wrong, he said, but speculated the debate about whether the facility was needed was not a primary cause of the bond's defeat.

The current facility is undersized, unsafe and doesn't meet basic, modern police needs. The need is obvious, but the chaos of November's election may have prevented some important information from reaching voters, he said.

During her campaign to be the city councilor for Ward 1, Kaser said she talked with a number of people who wanted a new police facility but were concerned about the size and wondered why it was a lot bigger than the recommendation from the Blue Ribbon Task Force. Many feared the high cost would delay seismic upgrades to the Vern Miller Civic Center and the Salem Public Library.

Going forward, Kaser said she would like to see city officials seriously listen to the concerns of voters.

"Ideally, the city would heed what voters' had to say and work with our community to find a way to do both," she said.

Architect Geoffrey James, a member of Salem Community Vision, driving force behind the reduced Courthouse Square repair costs and a member of the task force spoke out against the "bloated" bond before the election. He said the high price tag would doom the measure, and after it failed to pass, began working immediately with community action groups Salem Can Do Better and Salem Community Vision to draft a "Plan B."

That plan suggests a bond that pairs a 75,000 square-foot building — similar in size to the Eugene Police Department's building — on the O'Brien site costing \$29.2 million (plus the \$5.5 million land purchase) with \$27 million in seismic upgrades to city hall and the library.

The police department badly needs a new building, James said, and civic center employees and visitors need to be safe.

"It is important that we get this back on the ballot ASAP," he added.

An "ambitious but doable" timeline proposed by the groups suggests a January 2017 public hearing and city council vote on a Plan B followed by a bond on the May ballot. According to the timeline, the police department could be moved into the new facility by February 2019 and all seismic

upgrades would completed later that year.

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