

Salem chooses the correct site for police headquarters

A rare occurrence unfolded last week as the Salem City Council started down what was expected to be a jumbled path toward a new police station: The route was clear.

Everyone who testified before the council agreed that the best site for the project was the former O'Brien Auto Group location. The property is at Commercial and Division streets NE, just north of Salem's main downtown.

Such unanimity is unusual for Salem, which too often has a reputation as a haven for naysayers.

As a result of Monday's public hearing, the council endorsed the O'Brien site.

Naysayers could yet take root as the council moves toward putting a bond measure for the police headquarters on the November ballot. But there are at least five things on which [the council and the community should agree](#):

1. Salem desperately needs a new police station.

Located in the seismically unsound Vern Miller Civic Center, the current headquarters likely will come falling down in a big earthquake — just the opposite of what is needed in a natural disaster.

The current headquarters has other dangers, as well. It is so cramped, with makeshift offices and interview rooms, that it is difficult to keep suspects, victims and witnesses apart from one another. Interview rooms are not soundproof either.

That lack of space means equipment, evidence and some operations are spread across other locations as well. The resulting inefficiency wastes officers' time and could potentially compromise cases, although the department does its best not to let that happen.

For example, a modern police department has large stainless steel tables for sorting, tagging and properly packaging evidence. Salem officers share one table that is only slightly larger than a desk.

2. Policing is about relationships.

Effective public safety requires police to be more involved with the public. Communities are realizing that police stations should not be fortresses, set off from the public.

Modern building materials and technology allow for architectural designs that are secure but more welcoming to the public.

3. A new headquarters should be [functional, not fancy](#).

The headquarters should last at least 50 years. Designing a building that only serves Salem's current needs would be shortsighted and undoubtedly more expensive in the long run.

Salem has one chance to get this right — choosing the right location, the right design and the right price. Going too big or too small would be a mistake. So too would be trying to convert an existing building into a secure, high-tech law-enforcement headquarters.

4. Police substations are not needed.

Salem officers' patrol cars are becoming more technologically equipped, so they essentially function as mini-substations spread throughout the city. Investing in one central headquarters makes more sense than building and staffing substations.

5. The potential site needs modification.

A small office building was included in the proposed area. But it is neither for sale nor do the tenants want to move. That property should be excluded from the city's plans.

In developing a potential bond measure, the city will conduct polling, informal surveys and more hearings. [But there should be no doubt](#) about the need for a modern, efficient police headquarters.

Links

[Video of Salem police chief, mayor and others discussing a proposed new headquarters for police.](#)