

Salem police need, deserve new facilities

This is a case of "you get what you pay for." A well-designed and -constructed building will last, while also enhancing the efficiency and safety of police operations.

Salem residents seem to agree that they have an excellent city police department.

[They agree that the current police facilities](#) — spread among cramped space in the civic center, sewage treatment plant and rented space around Salem — are woefully inadequate and outdated.

They agree that the former O'Brien Auto Group property — in the 700 block of Commercial Street NE at the north end of downtown — is the best site for a new police headquarters.

Yet some residents then turn around and distrust the city to capably construct that police headquarters. Such opposition to the city's Nov. 8 ballot measure is confounding.

The opponents contend that Salem police should not move to a new, earthquake-survivable building unless the library and city hall offices also receive seismic improvements. Neither do they want the region's 911 dispatchers to move into the new, safer headquarters.

That logic seems self-serving.

It also doesn't make sense. Here are five reasons why:

1. The most important people in the event of a major earthquake or other disaster are emergency responders, including 911 dispatchers and police officers.

The longer that we delay getting them into safer quarters, the greater the risk that they will be incapacitated and unable to help us after an earthquake.

2. If Measure 24-399 fails on Nov. 8, no one knows when or if the city will try again. Meanwhile, [the outdated, crowded and seismically unsafe conditions](#) will persist for everyone.

3. Opponents have circulated a brochure with a photo illustration that shows Salem police cars in front of the Taj Mahal. It implies that Salem would build an extravagant police facility.

That implication is almost insulting. [This police department is rooted in frugality](#), as it has demonstrated for decades. Besides, has the city of Salem ever erected a lavish building? No.

4. The \$82,088,000 bond measure is a lot of money citywide. But national and world events have shown the [importance of police facilities](#) that are approachable and welcoming for the community yet secure against domestic and foreign terrorists.

Some communities, such as Eugene, have tried to do it on the cheap. Salem would be foolhardy to follow that example.

Salem property taxes for the bond measure would amount to only \$6 a month for the owner of a \$200,000 home. Because the city has paid off other debt, the actual increase for that homeowner would be only \$4 a month — \$48 a year for improved police services.

The city also will save money by no longer having to rent space for the dispatch center and some police facilities.

In addition, the Salem Police Department wisely saves money by using its patrol cars like mobile precincts, instead of constructing and staffing brick-and-mortar precinct stations.

5. Salem has spent years examining its police department needs, including hiring a reputable consulting company that has worked on more than 70 public-safety facilities.

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Little things matter. One example is designing the space so patrol officers can quickly grab their gear bags as they head out the door. Again, that is the value of hiring consultants who specialize in police buildings. Another is having separated, soundproof rooms so suspects, victims and witnesses no longer come in contact with one another at the police headquarters and don’t hear what the others are saying.

In contrast, the city of Salem has not done that same thorough examination and long-term planning for the rest of the Vern Miller Civic Center and the library.

The 1970s civic center is uninviting and confusingly designed. Should Salem have a smaller city hall, with drive-thru convenience, and make better use of online portals and video interaction for serving residents and businesses? Likewise, how would a 21st century library be best designed to serve the community?

Salem needs to find those answers before deciding what to do with the current city hall and library. In the meantime, let’s approve, design and construct a police facility that will serve Salem for generations to come.