

# Residents consider best site for police station

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## Conceptual plans

Plans for the seismic upgrade of Vern Miller Civic Center would turn the block-shaped city hall into a U-shape complex of city offices. The atrium that covers the building would be removed. Salem City Council Chambers would be demolished and move to a new structure at the civic center site. Police headquarters would be in a new three-story, 75,000-square-foot building adjacent to Mirror Pond and Pringle Creek.

Plans for a proposed \$70 million seismic upgrade and redesign of Vern Miller Civic Center sparked debate at community forum.

The chief disagreement among the speakers: Should the city build a new police headquarters at the civic center, or at another location?

Salem Community Vision, a local group formed in October, hosted Tuesday's event at the Grand Theatre in downtown Salem. About 90 people attended the event.

Geoffrey James, an architect who spoke on behalf of Salem Community Vision, said taxpayers could save nearly \$40 million with an alternate plan that would add seismic upgrades to the civic center, but move the police station to another site.

"All of us here on stage have one thing in common. We all believe we need a new police facility," James said.

The 41-year-old Vern Miller Civic Center, 555 Liberty Street SE, wasn't designed to withstand strong earthquakes.

Headquarters for city police is on the first floor of the three-story building. Police parking is under the building.

Speakers and members of the audience suggested a number of sites they said would serve the community better, and cost less to develop, than the civic center.

"A police facility in the Northgate neighborhood could improve quality of life, reduce blight and reduce crime," said Don Russo, chairman of the Northgate Neighborhood Association.

The neighborhood association has asked the city to consider consider vacant land at 3350 Portland Road NE, known as the Epping property, as the future home for Salem police.

Other locations suggested during the event:

- Surplus state property at the Oregon State North Campus.
- Vacant property on Mission Street SE.

- Several auto dealership sites in downtown, which are expected to be vacated in the fall. The owner of the dealerships, Lithia Motors, intends to move the dealerships to Salem Parkway

City officials at the event, including City Manager Linda Norris, made no commitment to veer from the city's basic plan. To gather public opinions about the plan, city officials said they have met with 38 community groups before Tuesday's public forum.

City officials said a site analysis for other possible police station locations would cost about \$50,000 per site.

Salem Chief of Police Jerry Moore said the department could successfully operate at a location outside of downtown. Keeping police headquarters at the civic center site, however, had several advantages, he said.

Police can quickly respond to security problems at city offices and the municipal court, Moore said. The public also benefits by having city services in a centralized location, he said.

The city has discussed the potential of having a \$70 million bond measure for civic center improvements on the November 2014 ballot.

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