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New judicial facility proposal moves to next step

Possible uses of county building explored

By Sarah Nigbor

Pierce County's Judicial Facility Planning Ad Hoc committee voted Oct. 17 to recommend a new judicial facility plan and costs associated with the project to the Finance & Personnel committee.

Representatives from Wold Architects & Engineers and Market & Johnson presented the committee with three variations of a courts addition to the current Pierce County Sheriff's Office at 555 W. Overlook Drive. The projected cost of the option the committee settled on is \$30.9 million, which would include four courtrooms, judge's chambers, a secure underground parking lot, and space for the clerk of court office, register in probate,

victim/witness coordinators, the district attorney's office, and a secure connection to the jail.

Market & Johnson, who built the existing law enforcement center (LEC) in 2017 at a cost of \$17.4 million, said in today's dollars, that cost escalates to \$28.4 million.

The \$30.9 million price tag would include a \$1 million place holder for possible furniture/furnishings, \$1.9 million for design services, and \$27.9 million in construction costs.

County Administrator Jason Matthys said a lot of pre-work was done when the LEC was built with the idea that someday the courts would move out there. Utilities for a possible addition were built into that master



This map shows where a judicial facility addition would be located adjacent to the current Pierce County Sheriff's Office at 555 W. Overlook Drive, Ellsworth. Map courtesy of Wold Architects

plan.

"A lot of work has gone into this in a short period of time," Matthys said. "It's hard to swallow the num-

ber a little bit, but when you look at construction projects around us..."

Pierce County Circuit Court Judge Elizabeth Rohl

said \$30.9 million is a lot of money, but she doesn't see what could be taken out.

"The four courtrooms are needed," she said.

Currently, Pierce County has two court rooms at the historic courthouse (414 W. Main St.) The court addition to the north side of the existing LEC would connect to the current lobby. Expanded parking would be included on the north and northeast for the public and on the west side for staff. The lower level would consist of 29 underground parking spaces and tie into the existing jail circulation.

The addition's main level would feature weapons screening at the entrance, meeting rooms, departments,

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Courthouse

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courtrooms, a holding cell and a secure elevator coming from a secure hallway in the lower level. A second floor would house more courtrooms, the district attorney's office and victim/witness spaces.

In an email to The Journal, Rohl said the state assesses the need for additional circuit court branches throughout the state.

"They review the case-loads of each county to determine need and allocate new judges based upon who has the highest need at the time," Rohl said. "The county would have to have the appropriate infrastructure to support an additional circuit court branch."

She said the county doesn't know for sure if the state will begin that process or if Pierce would be allocated a new judge if a new facility was built.

"What we do know for sure is that if we maintain our existing courthouse, we would not have the appropriate infrastructure to support an additional circuit court branch. In short, building a new courthouse does not guarantee Pierce County would get an additional judge, but not building a new courthouse guarantees it won't."

Rohl said Pierce County needs a second judge, even with a full-time court commissioner on staff.

"Pierce County is fortunate to have a full-time court commissioner but the duties of a court commissioner are somewhat limited and a commissioner cannot do everything a judge can



This map shows what one floor of a judicial facility addition onto the current Pierce County Sheriff's Office building (555 W. Overlook Drive, Ellsworth) could look like. Map courtesy of Wold Architects

do," Rohl said. "As the only judge, scheduling on my calendar can be difficult and it can be frustrating for parties to have to wait a long period of time to have their matters heard. Whether Pierce County retains a full-time commissioner position in the future really depends on the needs and caseloads at the time that a new judge is added."

The committee discussed at length different configurations for the addition, as far as functionality and security needs. They agreed this option is the best.

"I don't think we're doing our county justice by trying to skimp on this," said Supervisor Neil Gulbranson. "We really need to think about the security, and that's almost as important to me as

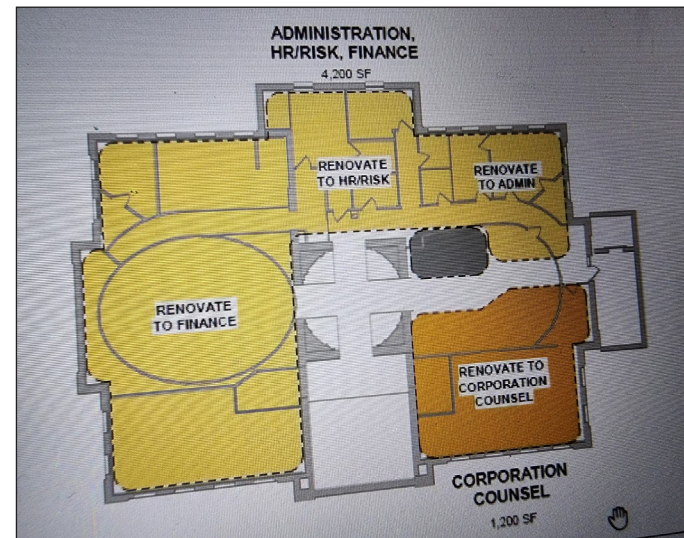
the room."

Having the courts attached to the LEC would eliminate the need for transporting inmates between the jail and courthouse, a cost savings to the county and elimination of a safety concern.

PCOB and Courthouse

Joel Dunning of Wold Architects & Engineering, who specializes in government spaces, presented ideas to the committee on how to use and repurpose space in the Pierce County Office Building, courthouse and courthouse annex when and if the courts move out. He talked to county staff about potential growth and use in departments.

"It's tough to look ahead 20 years, especially with human services since staff-



One proposal, once the courts move out of the current historic courthouse at 414 W. Main St., Ellsworth, is to make the second floor of the building into an administration floor for finance, corporation counsel, human resources and administration. Map courtesy of Wold Architects

ing depends on grant funding, etc. There was modest growth predicted throughout each department."

PCOB currently boasts 20,930 square feet of usable area, while the courthouse and annex combine for 16,064 square feet. The courts take up 5,420 square feet on the courthouse's second floor.

Human Services currently occupies the top floor of the PCOB At 412 W. Kinne St. Dunning suggested making the current public waiting area into a supervised visitation area and designating the space a staff only floor. An interview/check-in area could be staged on the ground floor, keeping potential volatile clients away from staff.

"They don't have a safe space to have face-to-face meetings with some challenging people," Matthys said. "This is a better way to do business."

Other suggestions included reconfiguring Public Health, Information Services

and the Aging & Disability Resource Center to better utilize space in the building. For example, the current ADRC staff have tiny offices and often have to meet with clients with mobility issues. One thought is to move the ADRC to the space occupied by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, if they vacate the building.

"There are no immediate pressing needs with these departments, but this is a way the county could think about utilizing the building in the future if expansion needs come to reality," Dunning said.

As for the historic courthouse and annex, Dunning listed two main proposals for the courthouse and annex:

Moving Land Management to the UW-Extension space in the annex, closer to an outside door since they have more foot traffic. Moving UW-Extension to the west side of the courthouse basement and Finance to the east side. One floor up, converting a vault and mailroom into additional space for the treasurer's office. Keeping the second floor vacant.

Vacating the annex building entirely, except for the board room and storage. Could possibly tear it down to reestablish the historic footprint of the courthouse or bring in a tenant. All existing departments could fit into the courthouse, once the courts move. An administrative floor could be created on the second floor for human resources, finance, administration, risk management and corporation counsel.

"It's interesting to see what can be done, not saying that it will, but it does provide us with some options," Matthys said. "There's no bones about it, if we do end up in the courthouse, we will have vacant space that we still have to heat and cool."



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