

# Pierce County JOURNAL

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## Swift Current Connect shares plans with Prescott Council

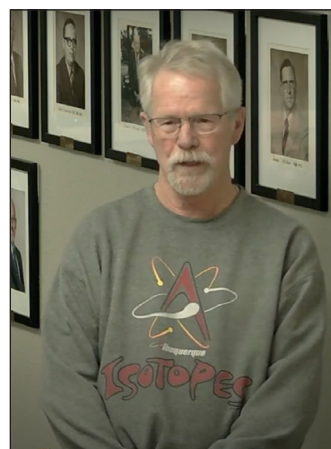
*Area Historical Society continues to grow, draw in visitors*

By Danielle Boos

On Jan. 8, the first Prescott City Council meeting of 2024 consisted of old news and plans for the future as the council listened to 2023 updates and new business ventures.

Scott Freier, Chief Operating Officer for Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services in Ellsworth, approached the council to explain the company's broadband subsidiary called Swift Current Connect. Swift Current Connect provides reliable, high-speed fiber internet service for residential homes and businesses. Freier stated that they are trying to get the cell towers hooked up on their system so there is better coverage on the bridge from Wisconsin.

"We wanted to dip our toes in the water a little bit to see if Prescott had any appetite for going to high-speed fiber internet," Freier said.



Dallas Eggers shared a progress update on the Prescott Area Historical Society at the Jan. 8 Prescott City Council meeting. Photo courtesy of Prescott Community Television

He said that right now Prescott has a copper-based plant in the ground from Century Link and Comcast but Swift Current Connect can offer more.

"Our main goal when this



Scott Freier, Chief Operating Officer with Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services, shared the future plans of Swift Current Connect with the City of Prescott. Photo courtesy of Prescott Community Television

started was to get our rural members in high-speed internet for everybody that lives in the country that these big companies want to forget

See PRESCOTT, Page 10

## Financing options for new judicial facility explained

*First reading is at January  
county board meeting*

By Sarah Nigbor

The Pierce County Board voted Tuesday, Dec. 19 to direct county staff to research financing options for a new judicial facility that would be built adjacent to the Pierce County Sheriff's Office at 555 W. Overlook Drive in Ellsworth.

The project, if approved, is expected to cost \$30,903,822 for a 38,934 gross square foot addition 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 mil-

lion, 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.

The space would house the following:

- Courts – general building: 3,811 square feet
- Courts – court room sets: 19,250 square feet
- Clerk of Courts – 2,033 square feet
- Register in Probate – 1,397 square feet
- District Attorney – 3,086 square feet
- Victim Witness – 1,126 square feet
- Court Security – 1,414 square feet

See PCB, Page 8

## One year later: Blooms 4



- Court Services – 1,176 square feet
- Drop-in workspace (Corporation Counsel, Human Services, etc.) – 722 square feet

The preliminary site plan shows expanded public parking to include 110 spaces, space for future expansion, a proposed courts addition (one story at/or below grade, with two stories above grade), and a new staff parking lot.

County Administrator Jason Matthys introduced speakers from Ehlers (financing), Wold Architects and Market & Johnson, who went through the projected project budget, layout of the proposed addition and tax impacts.

“We (Judicial Facility Planning Committee) asked them to be conservative,” Matthys said. “Our hope is to be able to get the size and scope of the project for as less as we can.”

Randy LaFave of Market & Johnson was part of the jail/sheriff’s office project. He said the budget for this proposed facility is all-inclusive from the time the dirt is turned until the keys are turned over. He estimated the inflation escalation to be at 6%.

“This is our historical gauge on how we’re going to inflate the number knowing what the cost will be next year and the year after,” LaFave said. “As Jason said, our goal is to beat the number that is there and bring those savings back to you, the county, as we did with the LEC. A lot of forethought went into the design of the LEC to supplement construction of a possible new judicial center.”

Joel Dunning from Wold Architects said Wold specializes in public sector architecture. A space needs assessment, which included discussions with all county departments affected by the courts, was conducted last summer.

“It’s tough to look ahead 20 years, especially with human services since staffing depends on grant funding, etc. There was modest growth predicted throughout each department,” Dunning said at an October meeting.

The study took into consideration the projected growth of the county and possible needs of a future judge. Currently, Pierce County has one judge and one court commissioner.

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

“They review the caseloads 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 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.”

## Budget

The equalized value of Pierce County has grown from \$3.312 billion as of Jan. 1, 2018 to \$5.422 billion for 2023, according to Ehlers’ calculations. The current tax rate for the county portion of property tax bills is \$3.89 per \$1,000 of equalized value.

“The equalized mill rate has been on a pretty steady decline,” said Financial Advisor Sean Lentz from Ehlers. “What’s driving that in the county is your equalized value as a county is growing much more rapidly than your county levy.”

Lentz presented three bond options for the board to consider:

\$32,495,00 bond size, fully reimburse any preliminary expenses funded from cash, level

annual payments

\$30,475,000 bond size, \$2 million cash contribution, level annual payments

\$31,160,000 bond size, \$2 million cash contribution, payments structured to achieve levy target

Matthys recommended Option 2, which would increase a property owner’s county portion of their tax bill by \$31 in 2024-25 per \$100,000 of equalized value (assuming there is no growth in the county, which is unlikely). He felt Option 3 would box the county in, as far as future borrowing capacity is concerned.

“With Option 3, you’d pay more interest, though there’d be less of a spike up the first year, but you’d pay more in the long run,” Lentz said. “These kind of legacy projects are a lot of money and it’s going to have a tax impact, but you’re nowhere near where the mill rate was in 2020 or 2021. We haven’t seen a meaningful decrease in equalized values for an extended period of time.”

Supervisor Sheila Lorentz said she wants more concrete information as to why a new judicial facility is needed. She asked for more information about which departments would stay at the downtown courthouse.

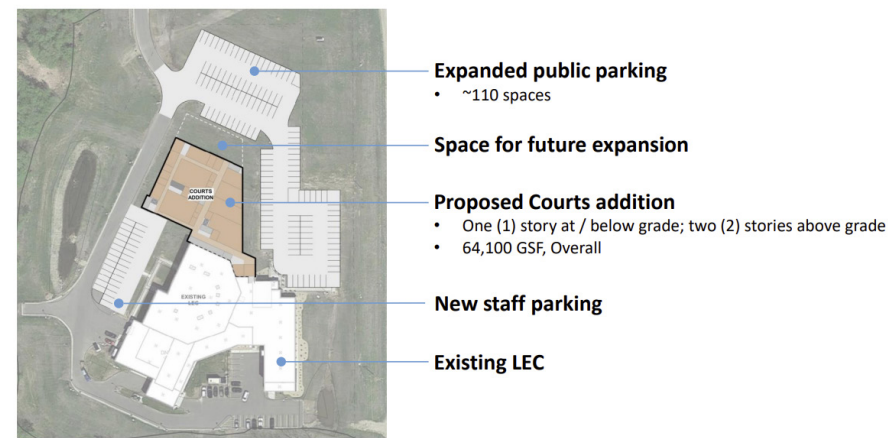
“Not just in generic terms,” she said. “I have questions about the absolute necessity.”

Supervisor Neil Gulbranson told her the District Court has said its criteria was not met by turning the former county board room into a hearing room, especially since there is only one exit. The courthouse contains one judge’s chambers when it needs two, plus there is nowhere to house juries to keep them sequestered.

“Just yesterday (Dec. 18), there were 80 potential jurors at a case,” Gulbranson said. “They had a jury trial plus victims, plus defendants, over 100 people on that top floor. Standing in line to use two bathrooms, and they had to bring in ramps for a handicapped person. Where do you put these people? You can’t have jurors going all over the place. I think we should move forward just as fast as we can. We’ve delayed this for years.”

The first reading on a resolution authorizing the borrowing not to exceed \$30,475,000 and providing for the issuance and sale of general obligation bonds will take place at the January County Board meeting, scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 23.

## Courts Addition – Preliminary Site Plan



The proposed Judicial Facility addition at the current Pierce County Sheriff’s Office would look like this, according to a rendering provided by Wold Architects and Market & Johnson. Image courtesy of Pierce County Board packet

## Pierce County judicial facility history

Pierce County Administrator Jason Matthys compiled a timeline of the judicial facility discussion following questions from the December Finance & Personnel Committee meeting. This and meeting minutes past discussions were distributed to county board members on Dec. 15.

The current courthouse, located at 414 W. Main St. in Ellsworth, was built in 1905 and has housed the Circuit Court since that time. There continues to be ongoing and increasing challenges with expansion, safety, security and overall operational efficiencies that have been studied and considered over the course of 27 years.

**1996-1997:** Voorhis Associates conducted a pre-architectural program and needs assessment of a new Justice Center to include the jail, sheriff’s office and circuit court.

**1998:** DLR Group, KKE provided a comprehensive analysis and project proposal of a Justice Center for consideration with a projected cost of \$14-\$15 million.

**2012:** Ad Hoc Committee created to study issues associated with the county jail and justice system.

**2013:** Ad Hoc Committee II further studies the options of a Justice Center vs. a standalone jail.

**2014:** Ad Hoc Committee III determines final jail site and size, acknowledging that the building site should accommodate a future courts facility and is designed accordingly.

**2017:** The new jail and sheriff’s office is constructed

and occupied at 555 W. Overlook Drive, Ellsworth. The jail site master plan accounts for future courts and parking.

**2020:** The old county board room at the courthouse is remodeled into an additional court room to address the backlog and increased number of court cases. However, it does not meet the specifications and criteria of the District Court.

**July 2022:** US Marshals Office conducts a security assessment of the Pierce County Courthouse

**Feb. 14, 2023:** Closed session meeting of the Law Enforcement Committee with Judge Elizabeth Rohl to discuss courthouse security concerns.

**April 18, 2023:** Closed session meeting of the county board with Judge Rohl to discuss courthouse security concerns associated with the results of the assessment.

**April 28, 2023:** Emailed memo from Administration to F&P members regarding the need for a Courthouse Facilities Needs Assessment and the formulation of an Ad Hoc committee whose responsibility would be to provide a recommendation to the county board.

**May 1, 2023:** The F&P Committee creates a Judicial Facilities Planning Ad Hoc Committee pursuant to 4-21 (1) of the Pierce County Code.

**May 23, 2023:** Judicial Facility Planning Ad Hoc meeting

**June 5, 2023:** The F&P committee authorizes a Judicial Facility Needs Assessment to be performed by Market & Johnson and Wold

Architects at a cost not to exceed \$21,000.

**June 6-Aug. 14, 2023:** Wold Architects meets with staff from each county department to discuss projected staffing and space needs.

**Aug. 29, 2023:** Judicial Facility Planning Ad Hoc meeting

**Oct. 17, 2023:** Judicial Facility Planning Ad Hoc Committee recommends approval of the Pierce County Courts addition concept (Option B) with a total cost of \$30,903,822 and forward to F&P.

**Oct. 18, 2023:** Email from Administration to all county board members labeled “Important Update” related to the court facility planning, providing detailed information regarding the activities thus far, a description of the proposed project, associated costs and next steps related to bond financial consulting services to study and consider project funding options.

**Oct. 25, 2023:** The proposed judicial facility site drawing and associated costs is published on the front page of the Pierce County Journal.

**Nov. 6, 2023:** F&P considers proposals from qualified bond consulting firms: PMA Securities and Ehlers, ultimately selecting Ehlers.

**Dec. 11, 2023:** A special F&P meeting is held to specifically discuss the proposed project and bonding options for consideration – no action taken.

**Dec. 19, 2023:** County Board meeting scheduled to discuss the proposed project and bonding options for consideration.