JoCo public safety priorities: 
new courthouse and coroner facility

By JODY HANSON and ERIC SCHULTZ

“It’s completely uncomfortable. It’s scary. It’s nothing you want to go through, especially after everything you’ve already gone through. Being nervous about him walking by you is just awful.”

This is an account from a crime victim (name omitted for her protection) describing how she felt during a close encounter with her attacker in the halls of the Johnson County Courthouse. The fact that the courthouse has no secure waiting area for victims is one of the dozens of problems with the 64-year-old building.

The layout of the courthouse allows for witnesses, jurors, victims, alleged criminals and even jail inmates to use the same public hallways. While the Johnson County Sheriff’s Office makes sure that inmates are shackled and handcuffed at all times during transport, intimidation still occurs.

“I’ve had a number of jurors, after trial, indicate that based on the current configuration of the courthouse, they felt extremely uncomfortable having to have contact with so many dangerous individuals,” said Johnson County District Attorney Steve Howe.

In the 2016 Citizens Survey, 95 percent of participants said it was very important or important to protect the general public from criminals when inside the courthouse. That input is one of the reasons many think it’s time for a new courthouse — one of the cornerstones of a community’s public safety system.

Making a courtroom safer and more secure
The Johnson County Board of County Commissioners is considering building a new courthouse across the street from the current location in downtown Olathe, pending approval of funding. The design of the new courthouse would house criminal and civil courts on separate floors and the layout of each floor would keep inmates and attackers away from jurors and crime victims.

The new courthouse would further protect the 400,000 visitors who pass through its doors each year. The current courthouse is positioned very close to the street, making it vulnerable to terrorism and other possible safety threats. A new courthouse would be built further from the street and, like other government buildings constructed after 9/11, would be constructed from blast-protective materials on the lower floors.

A decaying, overcrowded building
Built in 1952, the courthouse has gone through three additions and more than seven significant remodels. It was originally built to house most government departments, but through the decades the county has moved as many departments out as possible to ease the ongoing issue of crowded courtrooms.

“In the early 1950s, Johnson County’s population was just under 63,000. Today we’re at 575,000, and by 2025 we’ll have 700,000 residents,” said County Manager Hannes Zacharias. “We’ve converted conference rooms into courtrooms. We’ve moved out everyone we can. We are simply out of room and knowing what a priority our residents place on public safety, the prudent thing to do is to solve the problem today.”

In addition to being overcrowded, the Johnson County Courthouse is not aging well. The structure suffers from crumbling and cracked walls and windows that can’t keep out cold air and rainwater. The building’s plumbing, heating and cooling systems need significant repairs. Outdated technology is also a serious issue.

“Only three of our 23 courtrooms utilize modern audio visual equipment that provides judges and juries with the necessary technology to consider evidence and conduct a fair trial,” says Tim Mulcahy, director of Justice Information Management for Johnson County.
Making the courthouse accessible ADA compliant

A recent study shows that it will take millions of dollars to bring the courthouse up to basic standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This act protects individuals in wheelchairs or people who have other disabilities.

“Most of the courtrooms are not set up to allow a person in a wheelchair to access the jury box, judge’s bench or witness stand,” said Chief Judge Kevin Moriarty. “There is no space to add in ramps or create more space for wheelchairs. To make the courthouse ADA compliant, we will have to reduce the number of courtrooms at a time where we are already outgrowing the courtrooms we have.”

Voters to decide quarter-cent sales tax in November

The cost of a new courthouse is $182 million, which includes design, construction and furnishing the new building, tearing down the current building and landscape design and construction for a greenspace at the current building site.

In the Nov. 8 general election, voters will decide on a quarter-cent public safety sales tax (which sunsets after 10 years) to fund the project.

If that vote fails, it will cost $216 million to massively renovate the existing building and build a new four-story addition necessary to bring the courthouse to 28 courtrooms. The higher price tag will not fully address:

1. Safety and security (inmate movement in the same public areas as victims, jurors and the public)
2. Crowded courtrooms, placement of jurors and inmates in close proximity and lack of private meeting space for clients and attorneys
3. Accessibility/ADA compliance

“If the difference between $182 million for a new courthouse and $216 million to renovate and add on to the current structure isn’t convincing enough, take into account the financial difference when you look ahead 20 years,” says Brad Reinhardt, director, Johnson County Facilities Management. “When we forecast interest on debt, capital replacement costs and operating expenses for the two options, building a new courthouse will save taxpayers $161 million.”

A coroner facility for Johnson County

Johnson County is not as well-equipped as it could be to respond quickly to emerging crime trends — an important activity in providing public safety — because the county doesn’t have its own coroner facility. Many Johnson County residents may be surprised to know that all autopsies for the county are conducted at a privately-owned forensics lab in Wyandotte County. The county isn’t able to prioritize its county’s autopsies and needs more capacity as the county continues to grow.

Part of the proposed quarter-cent public safety sales tax to sunset in 10 years includes $19 million to fund Johnson County’s own coroner facility. The planned location is on the same campus as the Johnson County Sheriff’s Office Criminalistics Laboratory in Olathe, which would allow investigators from both facilities to collaborate as efficiently as possible.

“Technology in the forensics science area is allowing minute, trace DNA evidence to be located at a crime scene, so it’s important to have a coroner facility that can handle that same level of technology,” said District Attorney Steve Howe. “Our current facility does not have that capability, and that can jeopardize integrity in the criminal justice system.”

“You need an isolated room to do the autopsies and you have to make sure there is no air flowing into that room that could cause contamination,” said Dr. Robert Prosser, Johnson County’s coroner for the past 18 years. “Our current facility does not allow for that.”

Another benefit of a new coroner facility is real-time data reporting that can help the county manage potential public health issues. “A coroner facility will allow us to enhance our ability to identify emerging death or disease trends in our community,” said Lougene Marsh, director, Johnson County Department of Health and Environment.

WEB EXTRA

For videos, photos, FAQs and additional information about the courthouse, visit jocogov.org/courthouse.