

# Voters to determine fate of courthouse

By Jody Hanson

When Johnson County voters go to the polls in November, their ballot will include a question about funding a new courthouse and coroner facility with a 1/4 cent sales tax for 10 years. The Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) made that determination on April 21 at a Committee of the Whole session.

The current Johnson County Courthouse in downtown Olathe has housed the Tenth District Court of Kansas since 1952.

“The building suffers from an aging infrastructure, concerns with safety and security, lack of accessibility for those in wheelchairs, outdated technology and many more problems,” said Brad Reinhardt, director, Johnson County Facilities Management.

At the same time, the BOCC is considering constructing the county’s own coroner facility. Currently, all autopsies for the county are conducted at Frontier Forensics Midwest, LLC in Kansas City, Kansas.

“A new facility would provide real-time data reporting for epidemics and crime, resulting in quicker county response to potential public health issues and emerging crime trends,” said Dr. Robert Prosser, coroner for Johnson County.

County staff have been searching for a courthouse solution since 2001. Most recently, the BOCC revisited the issue in five Committee of the Whole sessions between November 12, 2015 and March 3, 2016, studying the concerns with the courthouse, the need for a coroner facility and new construction options for both.

The final information the BOCC considered before agreeing on a sales tax public vote was feedback from a two-month public engagement effort. In March and April, the county held six open house meetings where residents could view photos and a video explaining concerns with the current courthouse, hear a presentation from the consultant team about what a new courthouse would look like, learn about the financing options that would fund a new courthouse, and ask questions of county staff and local officials including Chief Judge Kevin Moriarty and District Attorney Steve Howe.

Meeting participants could give their feedback by taking a survey. Johnson County Director of Public Affairs Sharon Watson



presented that feedback to the BOCC at a final Committee of the Whole session on April 14.

“Among the survey participants, 93.1 percent said Johnson County needs a new courthouse, and 88.5 percent said Johnson County needs its own coroner facility,” Watson said. “When asked if they preferred a 1/4 cent sales tax for 10 years, a 1/8 cent sales tax plus a mill levy increase for 10 years or a mill levy increase for 20 years, the majority selected the 1/4 cent sales tax.”

By state law, voters need to approve a sales tax. The next step will be for county staff to recommend language to be placed on the November ballot, which the BOCC will approve in May.

“With November being a presidential election, along with other county and city races, the November ballot will be quite full,” said Hannes Zacharias, County Manager. “We have several months of work ahead making sure Johnson County voters understand this issue and know to watch for this question on the November ballot.”

For more information, please visit [www.jocogov.org/courthouse](http://www.jocogov.org/courthouse). BT

Jody Hanson is senior public information officer at the Johnson County Manager’s Office.

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