

Justice Center plans left out basics

Budget - Faulty planning means the real project will likely be half the size at twice the cost
Wednesday, June 25, 2008 BRAD SCHMIDT **The Oregonian Staff**

Multnomah County officials admitted publicly and repeatedly Tuesday that planning errors linked to the budget-busting Justice Center in the eastern part of the county help explain why the building's size could be slashed nearly in half even while total projected costs could likely double.

In the first public meeting on the project in almost three months, the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners grilled staff members about how a project that three years ago was estimated to cost \$16.35 million could now run about \$32 million.

Most glaringly, the original building concept called for a building with 70,000 square feet of useable space -- requiring an even larger facility for such basics as walls and hallways.

That wasn't reflected in the plan.

"That's a basic part of the project," Chairman Ted Wheeler said. "We left out a basic part of the project in our original estimates?"

There was a long pause from John Lindenthal, manager for the county's capital improvement program.

"Yes," he responded, taking most of the heat Tuesday because his boss, Facilities Director Doug Butler, was on vacation.

That's when another member of the facilities department stepped forward.

"I think it's fair to say that the original project plan wasn't prepared using conventional methods and probably wasn't quite vetted enough to be ready," said Mike Sublett, who is in charge of asset management for the county.

Wheeler thanked them for the honesty before dropping this bombshell:

"We're all sitting here with our jaws on the table, and we're wondering how we can build our credibility based on that information."

There was more. Lindenthal told commissioners that staff made a "bad decision" on non-construction cost estimates associated with the project in Rockwood. Staff "significantly underestimated" parking needs, he said, and "were unaware of" relocation expenses for businesses that sold land for the Justice Center.

Wheeler and Commissioners Jeff Cogen and Lonnie Roberts attended the briefing Tuesday. Each said he remains committed to a project, but without better cost estimates no one can say how exactly the Justice Center will move forward.

"This is a large and complicated project, and it needs leadership from the top," Wheeler said after the meeting. "And I am going to provide that."

Building something similar to the 70,000-square-foot project originally envisioned would cost a projected \$32 million, Lindenthal said.

If officials tried to accommodate all the wishes (and parking needs) of the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, the Gresham Police Department and Multnomah County courts, the projected price tag would run \$44 million, for a 117,000-square-foot building.

And if the county chooses a facility costing between \$26.3 million to \$27.5 million, taxpayers will get a building just 37,000 square feet to 43,000 square feet in size. That concept may or may not include the sheriff's office, and it would require additional funding and renovations in less than five years.

After the meeting, County Auditor LaVonne Griffin-Valade said she was "astounded."

"The presentation, it gives the county a bad mark. There were no answers, how did we get here?" she said. "I'm afraid we came off not looking so good. Everyone is a bit tarnished by this."