

## **Wabasha County Criminal Justice Center on time and within budget**

This is being written to provide the citizens of Wabasha County with facts about the new Criminal Justice Center, as well as facts about how the Wabasha County Board of Commissioners are responding to the State of Minnesota's cuts in Local Program Aid to counties.

There is a great deal of misinformation being spread by a small vocal minority of citizens in Wabasha County about the new Criminal Justice Center and actions of the County Board. After several public hearings and feasibility studies it was decided to build a new \$21 million Criminal Justice Center to house the Wabasha County Jail, Sheriff's Office (including dispatch), District Court, Court Administration, Probation Department, County Attorney's Office and Emergency Management.

In part, the new facility replaces a jail that was closed by the Minnesota Department of Corrections with a new 72-bed facility that allows for the segregation of inmates by classification, something the old jail did not allow and which the Minnesota Department of Corrections requires. The 72 beds are fewer than were originally recommended by outside consultants. This number of beds allows for potential future local needs while also allowing for potential revenue through boarding inmates from other counties. To save building costs the inmates will be double-bunked with two inmates per cell rather than 72 individual bunk cells.

Unlike the old jail that was not safe for the jailers, inmates and public, the new jail provides for the safety of all. Inmates can be transferred from vehicles to cells and cells to courtrooms without having to go outside, walk from building to building or walk inmates through public areas. They can also be held in a secure cell area outside of the courtroom.

The Criminal Justice Center also houses courtrooms and the County Attorney's Office that are handicapped accessible, unlike the old courtrooms and Attorney's Office. The State of Minnesota has annually notified Wabasha County that we must make these handicapped accessible. The new facility also corrects safety and security issues that the State has identified in the courtrooms and judge's chambers.

The new facility is functional, not extravagant as it has been called by a few who have not even seen the inside of the facility. Every effort is being made to save taxpayer dollars. For example, we are purchasing used furniture for the majority of the facility and landscaping costs are being reduced through the use of volunteer labor and equipment. Through the use of a geo-thermal system the new facility will be heated and cooled much more efficiently and cost-effectively than a conventional gas fired or electric HVAC system. In reality, the facility is a Chevrolet, not a Cadillac, it will do what needs to be done without frills. Both the budget and timeline are on track for the project to be completed in the last quarter of 2009.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections determines the number of jailers each facility must employ based upon the number of inmates being held and the configuration of the facility, this is not the decision of any county board. This new facility was planned to minimize staffing requirements. The County will need to fill 14 of 15 required Jailer positions, along with a Program Coordinator. The Matron is an existing position that was required in the old jail and for transporting inmates and does not need to be filled. No additional dispatch positions need to be filled.

There have been no attempts to hide any facts concerning the new Criminal Justice Center. Every detail and cost of the new facility has been discussed at public hearings and open County Board Meetings. The decision-making process has been transparent, as it should be. However, there are those who merely do not agree with the decisions made by their duly elected County Commissioners, which they have the right to do. The decision to build the Criminal Justice Center as it presently stands was the result of a unanimous vote of the five County Commissioners.

An additional cost cutting action being undertaken is the closing of the Public Health Building and moving those offices to the Social Services Building. This will be possible when personnel from the second floor of the Social Services Building are moved to the vacated offices in the old courthouse. The Social Services Building will then house Social Services, Public Health and Veterans Services, three departments that work closely together. This consolidation of services in one building will allow for convenient “one stop shopping” for Wabasha County citizens.

In addition, the County Board has been unfairly criticized by this same small vocal minority for not freezing employee wages, not cutting staff, not freezing hiring, and not reducing spending. Staff has been cut, one position from the County Attorney’s Office and three positions from Public Health. A position will also be eliminated in Social Services by July of this year. Hiring, in fact, is always frozen, it takes Board action to fill any open position, no department head can fill a vacancy without approval of a majority of the Board.

It is a fact that previous County Boards have maintained a lean county staff. We do not have the fat to cut that some other counties and the State have to cut and still be able to maintain quality services for Wabasha County’s citizens.

Spending has been reduced, at their last meeting the Board voted to reduce the budget by \$339,777 for 2009, with more cuts under consideration, and has identified additional potential cuts for 2010. The Board is not jumping the gun and laying people off and cutting services to our citizens before it is necessary, but are making changes as they are required in a reasoned and thoughtful manner.

David Johnson  
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