

Some Talking Could Save \$30 Million

“We need to talk.” This can be an ominous-sounding statement. Like when your boss utters it after a bunch of co-workers already have been laid off.

But government officials should love to hear those words from the people they serve.

For example, if taxpayers want to talk about being asked to pay \$70 million for something that could cost \$40 million, that’s a conversation worth having.

Which is what needs to happen here in Salem.

After several years of mostly-secret meetings, City officials are running around town pushing a plan to build a new three-story Police Facility with expensive underground parking at the Civic Center.

Cost: \$44 million. However, the City of Eugene recently remodeled an existing building into a similarly-sized police headquarters for \$17 million.

Salem Community Vision, a group working to improve local government decision-making through more citizen involvement, is asking why less expensive alternatives to the \$44 million Civic Center Police Facility haven’t been seriously considered.

Other good questions also are being put to the Mayor, City Manager, and City councillors about another \$26 million they want to spend on Civic Center renovations.

Why are you proposing \$6 million for seismic upgrades to City Hall offices, but no money to do the same for the Library? In an earthquake, isn’t it important to save the lives of Library visitors and staff?

Why do you want to demolish the current Council Chambers and rebuild it nearby when engineers say it can be fixed up at a much lower cost?

Why should mature trees between City Hall and the Library be cut down? Or Mirror Pond turned into a drainage ditch? Shouldn’t green spaces be preserved rather than destroyed, enhanced instead of diminished?

Why do Civic Center renovation plans contain no mention of energy efficiency, solar panels, bicycle-friendliness, public transit, or such? Are City officials aware that Salemians, like Oregonians in general, care about the environment?

So far the City of Salem and Salem Community Vision mostly have been engaging in parallel play. Sometimes advocates of the \$70 million and \$40 million proposals have spoken to the same group, but at different times.

They need to get together.

Debate the Police Facility and Civic Center plans in an open public forum. Duke it out. Respectfully, factually, honestly. Allow plenty of time for questions and comments.

I keep hearing from people how frustrating it can be to communicate with City officials. I've experienced this myself when I asked why the five beautiful U.S. Bank trees were cut down against the advice of the City's own tree experts.

Citizens often are viewed as threats. Questions frequently are seen as attacks. A "circle the wagons" response to reasonable inquiries shows how fearful some City officials are to having the public's business made, well, public.

If talking can save taxpayers \$30 million, converse away. Let's have some debates, Salem Community Vision and City of Salem. I'll be in the front row. With popcorn.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com