

Salem losing millions in facility proposal

Written by Geoffrey James Guest Opinion

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Can Salem taxpayers afford a \$70 million to \$85 million proposal for a new police facility and seismic upgrade of the Civic Center? We don't think so.

I am working with a new group of citizens called Salem Community Vision. They've come together to advocate for more community involvement and fiscal responsibility in local government. We have the same volunteers who put the Courthouse Square project on the right track to get the repairs done for \$30 million less than the county was told they had to spend.

Now we have a similar message for city leaders.

Our message is a positive one. The Salem Police Department needs and deserves a new facility. They are in a totally inadequate and overcrowded space: just 28,000 square feet in the basement and first floor of City Hall. This is a building that may collapse in a major earthquake, crushing our first responders and their vehicles just when we need them the most.

Eugene had the same problem. How did they solve it?

They moved their police department out of City Hall into a re-purposed 65,000 square foot building with surface parking spaces. "It's a perfect solution," says the Eugene police chief.

Their new facility cost only \$17 million. Much less than the \$35 million city staff are projecting for Salem's new police facility.

So why the huge difference in cost between two cities with comparable police facilities? The difference mostly has to do with the city of Salem's insistence that the facility be in a new building at the Civic Center. This location requires 235 underground parking spaces in a \$13 million city staff garage. When the "big one" comes, the police cars may be trapped, buried underground.

There are many other problems with the city's proposal. For example, a new City Council chambers is planned to be built a short way from the current one, at a cost of \$1.3 million. Their proposal would take out mature trees and open space while doing harm to Peace Plaza and Mirror Pond.

Salem Community Vision is proposing an alternative plan for the police facility and Civic Center seismic upgrade that is responsible and affordable. It involves selecting one of several available sites in town that could accommodate a 70,000-plus square foot building and 200-plus surface parking spaces. This police facility can be built for under \$20 million.

We believe the needed seismic upgrade to the entire Civic Center (including the library) can be accomplished for another \$20 million. The total \$40 million bond levy would be about half of the tax increase the city is currently proposing.

The city is on the wrong track in planning for needed improvements to city of Salem facilities. Salem Community Vision has a better idea. We hope city officials are listening and want to talk about alternatives. Potentially saving \$30 million or more is worth a conversation.

Geoffrey James A.I.A. is a Salem architect who has been active in this community for 40 years. In 2013 he helped found Salem Community Vision, a group of local community leaders who support the proposed police facility and also seismic repairs to City Hall. He can be reached at salemcommunityvision@yahoo.com.