

Stronger and spendier

Design changes that include strengthening Eugene's planned City Hall so it can withstand a major earthquake are expected to increase the building's cost, city officials say.

The Register-Guard asked for the revised cost estimate of the four-story building — last authorized by the City Council to cost no more than \$17.85 million — but officials have refused to answer.

The city staff is scheduled on April 11 to present the City Council with an updated design and revised cost estimates for the building planned at Eighth Avenue and Pearl Street. The council last received a public briefing on the project in July.

"We expect that some of the design changes, such as the upgrade to meet a higher seismic standard, will cause an increase in the cost estimates, and we will know better once we have gotten through these steps (to refine the design)," city spokeswoman Jan Bohman said. "The City Council will then need to approve any changes to the budget, and that is when the information will be available to the public."

The design changes have delayed the start of construction. Now city officials say construction will start in late summer or early fall, about nine months later than the January start date that the city staff had provided the City Council last year.

With the changes, Bohman said, "City Hall is becoming safer, greener, more welcoming and a better long-term investment for the community as a result of this extra time and work."

An apparent driver of the anticipated cost increase is the work to strengthen the building to a standard reserved for buildings deemed essential in an emergency, including fire and police stations and hospitals, so they are immediately operable after a major earthquake or other disaster.

In interviews last week, the mayor and councilors acknowledged that they never voted or gave official direction for the city staff to move ahead with a seismic upgrade.

But the majority of the elected body said they support the upgrade or are open to the move if the cost increase is reasonable. They said the staff work fell in line with the council's stated policy goals.

The move also makes sense, they said, given the renewed public interest in the area's

vulnerability to a major earthquake that followed last summer's story in The New Yorker magazine about the potential for the Cascadia Subduction Zone, a major fault off the Oregon Coast, to unleash a catastrophic earthquake.

"That's not explicit decision-making, but it's implicit," Mayor Kitty Piercy said.

Several councilors noted that a higher-priced City Hall can't proceed without their OK because they have budgetary authority over the project.

Councilor Greg Evans said a significant cost increase would give councilors pause.

But if "it's reasonable in terms of how much it's going to be, and we have an identified source in that budget to pull that money from ... then that's another story," he said.

A 'legacy project'

The new building, described by city officials and its architects as a "legacy project" and Eugene's "civic heart," will be built on the southwest portion of the block that held the former City Hall until it was razed a year ago.

The former City Hall opened in 1964, before current seismic design standards were adopted in Oregon, and an analysis of the building found a "significant probability of extensive damage and/or possible collapse" in a major earthquake.

The first floor of the new 30,000-square-foot building — about a third of the floor space of the old City Hall — will hold the council chamber, other meeting space and a public lobby.

The third floor is reserved for the offices of the mayor and city manager and more than 30 employees who work in the city manager's office.

Outside will be a public plaza, which includes a water feature and seating along East Eighth Avenue, as well as parking and landscaping.

The architect treated the plaza, council chamber and public lobby as one space, divided by a glass front with an interior layer clad in western red cedar reclaimed from the old City Hall a few feet inside.

Other, less defined plans call for another phase of City Hall to be built on the northwest part of the block.

The City Council initially set the project's maximum budget at \$15 million. It authorized a

nearly \$3 million increase — to \$17.85 million — in late 2014 when it agreed to add a fourth story as unfinished “shelled space” that can be used for a future expansion.

About \$4.7 million has been spent on the project as of March 1, including the demolition of the former City Hall and the design of the new one, Bohman said.

Throughout the planning, city councilors have reiterated that they want the project to stay on budget.

Following the presentation in July, Piercy said she was a “little anxious” about how the initiatives to curb energy use — a key feature of the building — would impact the building’s price tag. The new City Hall will use an energy-efficient ground-based heat pump to heat and cool the building. There’s also space on the roof for the future installation of solar panels so the building can generate its own electricity.

“I have a big appetite on a small budget,” Piercy said.

Categorizing risk

The building code adopted through most of the United States, including Oregon, assigns what’s known as a “risk category.”

The category generally increases with the importance of the building in terms of its availability after an emergency and the risk to human life if it collapsed.

Barns, as an example, are assigned risk category I, the lowest level, because they’re rarely occupied by many people often so there’s a low risk to human life if they collapse.

Emergency shelters, operations centers, fire and police stations and hospitals are assigned risk category IV, the highest level deemed “essential facilities.” The designation recognizes that a structural failure would endanger the people inside the building, but also, in the event of earthquake or other disaster, the larger community that relies on it for emergency response or shelter.

As a result, “essential facilities” are designed and built the strongest to minimize the risk of damage or collapse. The buildings are designed to withstand 50 percent more load — the forces a building endures in hurricanes and earthquakes that it’s engineered to withstand so it doesn’t topple over — than the typical home, engineers say. The aim is that the building is immediately operational after a disaster, they say.

The new City Hall initially was designed as a risk category III, assigned to buildings

“whose primary occupancy is public assembly” of a large number of people and that represent a “substantial hazard” to human life.

Upgrading to a risk category IV requires more steel and cross-bracing in the building, plus more anchoring to secure electrical and mechanical systems and piping for fire sprinklers so they don't pop loose or fall over during shaking, explained Mike Penwell, the city employee managing the City Hall project.

The glass façade on the south side of the building will remain as crews will install a safety glass that holds together when shattered, Bohman said.

Richard Rogers, the state's chief building official, said such a building should ride out a major earthquake with only minimal damage, but it may need minor repairs before it can be operable again.

“It's not falling down,” he said. “There should be no loss of life.”

The state building code requires that fire and police stations, hospitals and “communications and operations centers” meet the highest standard, but the classification of other buildings not specifically listed in a category is at the discretion of a city's building official.

The city's fire and police stations are in other locations, away from the planned City Hall.

However, the mayor, the City Council and city manager have responsibilities outlined in the area's adopted plan for how the cities of Eugene and Springfield will prepare for and respond in an emergency.

For example, the mayor convenes the City Council for emergency sessions and helps efforts to inform the public and coordinate the response, among other duties.

City Hall “is not a 911 center, but it has that coordinating function that is essential,” said Councilor Alan Zelenka, who supports the upgrade.

A question of need

City officials explained that having the civic venue standing after a disaster would be a confidence booster for the community.

Penwell told The Register-Guard in February that The New Yorker story about the regional threat posed by a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake increased awareness that there are going to be a lot of unusable buildings around Eugene when the fault slips.

Researchers say the Cascadia zone, a major fault that runs off the Oregon Coast, is capable of producing a magnitude 9 quake.

Having City Hall standing afterward, Penwell told The Register-Guard, is about “community confidence, it’s about having a place to come and get information.”

In addition, avoiding having to rebuild City Hall would help the city meet its sustainability goals, he said.

“After an earthquake, we don’t want to tear down this building and throw it away and build again,” Penwell said. “I think it’s an important aspect of our sustainability approach and stewardship, as well.”

But local architect Otto Poticha, a critic of the new City Hall’s design who had argued for the renovation of the old civic building, said the initial standard was sufficient as it ensures that the building wouldn’t collapse and that the people inside would evacuate safely.

“So why redesign for essential services?” he asked. “Why the additional expense? Why delay the construction for a year” that will increase the cost because of inflation?

Penwell and Bohman had declined to say how much the structural changes would add to the building’s price tag.

“We’re still analyzing exactly what the implications are, but we’re getting closer,” Penwell said.

Two weeks ago, The Register-Guard submitted a public records request seeking documents between the city and the project’s general contractor and construction manager, Eugene-based McKenzie Commercial, related to the cost.

The city hasn’t yet provided either a timeline or estimated cost for the newspaper to obtain those documents.

As the architect, Rowell Brokaw Architects of Eugene, refines the project’s design, according to a copy of the agreement that the city did provide, McKenzie is required to update the estimated cost of the work until the contractor and city agree on a guaranteed maximum price, which has not yet occurred. The city must approve these updated cost estimates.

The agreement further notes that McKenzie will inform the city and architect when cost

estimates exceed the approved budget and make recommendations on how to bring the cost back in line.

Neither the architect nor construction manager returned phone messages seeking comment.

A "path forward"

In January, Councilor Betty Taylor in an email asked City Manager Jon Ruiz who had authorized moving ahead with the upgrade.

Ruiz responded that "Councilors expressed a strong need for City Hall to remain operable in the event of a disaster" when the staff made a Sept. 16 presentation about the city's preparation for Cascadia.

This makes sense, he continued, as city government will need to continue operating after an earthquake.

"Designing the building to an 'essential facility standard' rather than a 'life safety standard' will assure we are able to fulfill our responsibilities," he said. "Ultimately we want to provide the city with the safest building possible."

A review of video from the Sept. 16 meeting shows that only one councilor, Zelenka, expressed such a sentiment, and that the city staff already appeared on a "path forward" to further strengthening the building. No councilors objected to the move, but they didn't give their formal consent either.

During the meeting, the staff told the City Council that police and fire headquarters already meet the highest standard. Zelenka commented that the city staff should "look strongly" at other city-owned buildings, as well. "The new City Hall is a great example where that's a building that I think should be an operable building," he said.

Zelenka added: "That is a chunk of money to do that. If we did it on the City Hall it would actually add to the cost of it, I suspect."

Myrnie Daut, the city's risk services director, confirmed to the council that the city staff was looking at doing that and said the minor July 4 temblor near Walterville served as a reminder of the threat posed by an earthquake.

"I think we have a path forward to enhance the seismic standard to make the new City Hall operable because we want, if and when Cascadia comes, we want our council and our city

manager and staff to be able to operate from the seat of government, not from tents in the parking lot," Daut said.

Five of the seven city councilors interviewed either indicated that they supported the upgrade or that it had enough merit to discuss further. Councilor George Poling didn't return a phone message seeking comment.

Councilor George Brown said the building should have been designed to the highest standards "from the get-go," although he did want to know where the money would come from to pay for it.

"We're having afterthoughts," he said. "This should have been part of the original" design.

Councilor Claire Syrett said it may require a "hard choice" by the council, depending on the revised cost estimate, but she supports the upgrade.

"You need a centralized location for your government," she said.

She said City Hall would provide a place for volunteers who want to help with the response and recovery to congregate and could provide space for other government agencies if their buildings are inoperable.

Only Taylor was opposed to the upgrade.

"If there's huge earthquake, the whole thing will be underwater anyway," she said, referring to the potential breach of the flood-control dams east of Eugene that threaten to inundate the area. Experts have said a cascading breach of the dams is highly unlikely.

Councilor Mike Clark was on the fence, saying he wants to hear from the staff about why the upgrade is worth the added cost.

"I need to be convinced yet that an essential life quality standard is necessary," he said. "I certainly want to evaluate that against the additional cost."

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Here is the breakdown of the revenue sources that will be used to pay for the \$17.85 million budgeted cost of the new City Hall. City officials have not identified how they'll pay for an anticipated increase in the project cost that they have publicly acknowledged but not specified.