

# Justice Center Briefing Sheet

Sheet 5, October 2007

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

As the Justice Center planning project has moved through its various stages, a number of questions have been asked consistently. The purpose of this *Briefing Sheet* is to provide answers to those questions that are asked frequently.

### QUESTION 1: What will be included in the new justice center?

**RESPONSE:** Currently, the following agencies are identified for inclusion in the proposed new justice center:

- Courts
- Judiciary (Family Court Commissioner, District Court Commissioner, Jury Assembly)
- District Attorney's Office
- Clerk of Courts
- Probation and Parole
- Public Defender's Office
- Stevens Point Police Department
- Sheriff's Department
  - Dispatch
- The Jail
- Coroner's Office
- Register in Probate
- Juvenile Detention and Programs
- Emergency Management Department

### QUESTION 2: Why do we need new courtrooms in the proposed justice center?

**RESPONSE:** The current space is insufficient and falls short of providing adequate security for the public as well as the professionals in the justice system (Judges, jurors, etc.). For example, Portage County currently has three courtrooms and judges. We need a fourth judge and courtroom to handle the growing volume of cases that are dealt with by the courts. In addition, there are no rooms in the area of the courts to allow for attorney-client conferences. An example of inadequate security is that visitor screening, as well as secure waiting areas for witnesses and inmates during court processes, is too limited.



This document contains answers to questions that are frequently asked about the Justice Center planning project in Portage County.



**QUESTION 3: Why do we need a new jail in the proposed justice center?**

**RESPONSE:** *The current jail is too small and operationally inefficient. For example:*

- *The county expects to spend \$731,000 in 2007 to house inmates in other counties because of overcrowding. Only five years earlier (2002), the county spent just \$225,454 to house inmates in other counties.*
- *Inmates going to the courtroom from the jail have to be escorted across Strong's Avenue and through the public hallways of the County City Building into the courtroom. This is a serious public safety issue.*
- *The current jail's design requires too many staff to supervise the inmates, resulting in unusually high staff-to-inmate ratios compared to other contemporary jails in Wisconsin.*
- *It is too small to provide for different programs to inmates as a means to reducing recidivism.*

**QUESTION 4: Why do the Sheriff's Department and the Stevens Point Police Department need to be included in the proposed justice center?**

**RESPONSE:** *The plan is to locate the two protective service units in shared space (i.e. collocate the two units) and, thereby, implement joint dispatch and share other common spaces. Changes like these will result in efficiencies that we don't have today.*

**QUESTION 5: Assuming there is a sizeable relationship between the number of inmates in a county jail and the number of people living in the county, is Portage County expected to grow so much that we need significantly more jail beds and another courtroom?**

**RESPONSE:** *The number of inmates in a county jail is not significantly related to the number of people living in the county. The size of the inmate population is more influenced by changes in state laws, the economic vitality of the county, and how the community chooses to respond to crime.*

**QUESTION 6: Rather than build a new justice center, why not simply remodel and add on to our existing jail and courthouse as needs dictate?**

**RESPONSE:** *Adding on to a jail that has an inefficient design for operational purposes is not good stewardship of resources. Over the life of a facility, the cost of operations far exceeds the cost of construction. The difficulty of adding a fourth courtroom and related offices to the current County City Building is that there isn't space available on the third floor to convert to a courtroom and the building wasn't structurally designed to accommodate expansion of this magnitude.*



**Locating the County Sheriff's Department and City Police Department together will provide opportunities to share common spaces and implement a joint dispatch system. These changes will result in improved efficiencies across the law enforcement system.**



**QUESTION 7: If we build a new justice center to cover the next 20 years, will we have to build another new justice center in twenty years?**

**RESPONSE:** *Every effort is being made to avoid this very situation. That is one of the reasons so much time is being taken to study the county's justice system needs over the next 30 and more years. As planning for a new justice center continues, special attention is being given to the ease of expanding the facility in the future. This includes structural considerations of the building itself as well as where the facility is located.*

**QUESTION 8: What will happen to the current jail, courtrooms and other office space that will be vacated if a new justice center is constructed?**

**RESPONSE:** *Whenever possible, we intend to use vacated space in the County-City Building and the County's Law Enforcement Center. However, because of the configuration of the space in the current jail and the multiple floor levels in the various detention areas, there is no reasonable way of "recycling" this area. Therefore, the jail portion of the law enforcement center will likely be torn down. The remaining area of the building, which currently serves as office space for units like the Sheriff's Department and Emergency Management, will continue to be used for office space.*

*Space vacated in the County-City building (including courtrooms, judges' chambers, etc.) is also expected to be used for office space.*

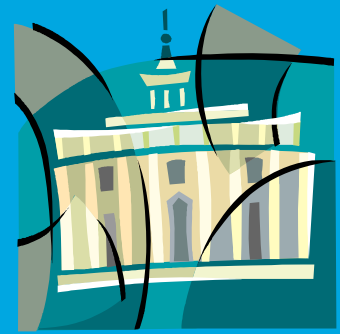
*In recent months, the County Board has tried to find office space for more than 60 people in a new federally funded service area. This new federal program provides care for families in the county — particularly care and assistance for the elderly. Temporary space has been identified in the basement of the Portage County Home. However, that is only temporary because the County Home has its own need for space.*

*In addition, the Farm Services Agency (also federally funded), currently located in the County Annex, is also requesting additional office space.*

*These two federally funded programs, both of which will pay a fee to the county for the space they use, are likely to take up most of the space that will be vacated, if the new justice center is constructed. Any remaining unassigned space will go to units that have a critical need for additional work area.*

**QUESTION 9: "If we build it they will come." Is that true in the sense that communities tend to "apply the law" so as to fill whatever jail space they have available?**

**RESPONSE:** *Experts have reported that this situation does happen, if certain precautions aren't taken at the outset. Among these precautions is the need to affirm that professionals in the justice system will continue to use a variety of correctional interventions to reduce recidivism.*



**Repeat offenders make up a large portion of the jail population in Portage County. A variety of programs are in place to help reduce recidivism. New or expanded programs will be explored as part of the Justice Center planning project, and will ultimately work to help reduce repeat offenses.**





Community safety issues guide decisions about whether a person should serve time in the jail or be under supervision outside the jail. Incarceration serves a number of purposes, from protecting the community from repeat offenders to providing services necessary to help a person address life issues.



**QUESTION 10: What options to jail time are being used/considered as a way of reducing the need for a new justice center and reducing recidivism?**

**RESPONSE:** *The complete list of options is too long to include here, but among the key programs currently in operation are the following:*

- Assessment and Case Management Services
- Day Report
- Intensive Supervision Program for Repeat OWI and other Offenses
- Electronic Monitoring
- Chemical Dependency Counseling
- Mental Health Treatment
- Parenting Skills
- Supervised Community Service Work Crews
- Court Date Reminder System
- Employment Services
- Probation and Parole
- Transitional Living Program
- Sex Offender Programming
- Batterers Intervention Program

*Other Programs offered by the community include:*

- Oxford House
- Volunteers in Probation Program

*Ideas under Consideration:*

- Female Offender Program
- Expansion of Portage House
- Case Management System
- Expanded Use of Assessment Tools
- Graduated Sentences

**QUESTION 11: What actions are being used/considered as a way of reducing recidivism?**

**RESPONSE:** *Repeat offenders make up a major portion of the population of jails across the country and Portage County is no exception. Some of the programs listed in the response to question 10 above are directed at reducing the need for jail beds as well as reducing recidivism (e.g., Oxford House, Chemical Dependency Counseling, Mental Health Treatment, Employment Services, etc.). These programs and others that are cost effective will always be welcomed as a way of embracing the community's desire to change offenders' behavior so that they are contributing to the community in a positive way.*

**QUESTION 12: How do changing standards (e.g. new laws) at the state and federal levels affect the need for a new justice center?**

**RESPONSE:** *Changes in laws have a major influence on the need for jail space and cases processed through the courts. For example, when Truth In Sentencing was implemented in the mid-1990s there was a profound impact on the jail population and the courts, which resulted in increased court cases and mandatory jail time.*

**QUESTION 13: Are we using the jail to house people who don't need to be locked-up?**

**RESPONSE:** *That is a question that gets asked regularly by professionals in Portage County's justice system. There are four important reasons for incarceration: (1) to protect the community, (2) to deter repeat behavior, (3) to provide services, and (4) to hold offenders accountable for their behavior.*

*The most important one of these four reasons for incarceration is protecting the community. Every effort is made not to release people from jail, if they are known to be a danger to the community.*

*Within the limits of our laws, residents of each county influence what is considered to be a danger, just as they influence the other three reasons for incarceration. Residents influence them by the resources they make available to staff who work in our justice system as well as by the community's values and expectations with regard to issues like punishment and rehabilitation.*

**QUESTION 14: What has been done/is being done in the local criminal justice system to maximize the use of current facilities and reduce the need for a new justice center?**

**RESPONSE:** *Portage County is known to have a progressive justice system. For example, Portage County is one of only a few counties in Wisconsin to have a social worker assigned to provide in-the-jail service to inmates. In addition, over ten years ago the County instituted a Justice Coalition made up of a diverse group of system and community members. They meet regularly to discuss critical issues, address mutual concerns and promote intervention strategies. This group has worked together to examine the reasons for increased jail utilization, offer policies to better manage jail bed use, and shepherd programs to influence offender behavior. There is ongoing commitment to measure the impacts of these policies and intervention strategies. The needs assessment was one of the recommendations to ensure that all options were considered along with the new jail beds. Expanding the number of jail beds is being recommended as a final resort to managing the growing jail population, not as a first resort.*

**QUESTION 15: If we build a new justice center, will inmates in the new jail have a more violent history than current inmates have if the county rents jail beds to the state or other counties?**

**RESPONSE:** *Making jail beds available to other jurisdictions will be pursued as a means of generating revenue until those beds are needed by Portage County. However, specific inmates will be accepted from other jurisdictions only if we have jail beds in a section of the jail that fits their circumstance. For example, if another jurisdiction needs a bed in the maximum security section of the jail and none is available, the inmate won't be accepted. This type of situation is avoided by leasing beds so that the leasing jurisdiction (i.e. county or state) knows in advance what is available for its use. Portage County prefers to lease unused beds for this reason.*

*It is important to note that, even if we had a prisoner from another county in the maximum security section of our jail, that individual would NOT be released into the Stevens Point community after he/she served his/her sentence. Instead, the individual would be returned to his/her home county and would be released there.*



**The cost of a new Justice Center is dependent upon two primary expenses: the cost of construction and the cost of operation. These costs are influenced by the facility's location and design, and also by the programs that are provided to those in the justice system.**



**QUESTION 16: How much will a new justice center and associated interventions cost?**

**RESPONSE:** *The simple answer is that it depends! That's probably not a surprise. There are two primary costs associated with the project: The cost of construction (including land acquisition) and the annual cost of operations. The magnitude of these two costs is dependent on many things including the following:*

- *Where the facility is located. Land costs vary significantly from one location to another.*
- *How the facility is designed — one story or multiple story.*
- *Whether a new correctional halfway house (i.e., Portage House) is also constructed.*
- *Whether additional programming services should be provided as further means of reducing recidivism.*

**QUESTION 17: Will my taxes go up if a new justice center is constructed?**

**RESPONSE:** *It is not possible to say whether taxes will or will not go up with the construction and operation of a new justice center. However, when cost estimates from Mark Goldman Associates (i.e., 63.3 million dollars for construction) were presented last year, the county calculated that taxes would not need to be increased to cover construction costs. While taxes may not increase to cover construction costs, it was also noted by county leaders that virtually no funds would be available to cover any other significant capital expenditures in the county for as long as 20 years. Operational costs are not yet sufficiently defined to be able to calculate their impact on taxes.*

**QUESTION 18: In addition to jail beds being leased to other jurisdictions, space in the justice center is also proposed to be leased to other agencies (e.g. city and state). How much revenue are those leases expected to generate annually?**

**RESPONSE:** *Currently, the County leases space at market rate. The market rate at this time is \$11 per square foot. As the planning process moves forward, a more precise estimate of square footage available for lease will be developed, and an accurate assessment of potential lease revenue will be calculated.*

**QUESTION 19: Why not build a regional jail as a way of saving resources for the counties involved?**

**RESPONSE:** *While a regional jail would likely save on the cost of construction, it would increase the cost of operations. For example, inmates would need to be transported to their respective jurisdictions for court hearings. In addition, inmates on work release privileges would have trouble getting to their job site because there would be no access to transportation. Currently, these inmates typically walk or bike from the jail to their work site.*

**QUESTION 20: Who will decide the location for a new justice center?**

**RESPONSE:** *State law specifies that the courts must be located in the city limits of each county seat. Therefore, the Stevens Point City Council will have final authority on approving a site for the courts.*

*Furthermore, the Portage County Board has gone on record supporting locating the jail and courts next to each other. In view of this position, the Stevens Point City Council will have final authority on approving a site for the courts and jail. That is, a new justice center.*



Justice Center  
project  
information is  
available on the  
web at

[www.co.portage.wi.us](http://www.co.portage.wi.us)

click on the  
Justice Center  
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Project link.

