

## History of the Portage County Justice Center Project

A number of events have shaped the Justice Center project that has been underway in Portage County over the past several years. This document provides some insights into changes in the Justice System in Portage County that have shaped the county's response to issues within the system.

- ❖ The county has studied jail bed needs for over two decades, since the mid-1980s. A number of factors contribute to jail bed demand, so county officials have monitored trends and discussed potential alternatives for many years.
- ❖ In 1990, the current jail was constructed on the corner of Arlington Street and Strongs Avenue in Stevens Point. The jail opened with a maximum capacity of 87 inmates. In 1995, one Huber area of the jail was converted to juvenile housing, lowering the jail capacity to 79.
- ❖ In 1995, the county looked into a joint Huber facility with Wood County. Leaders from both counties hoped that this proposed facility would address overcrowding issues in both county jails. After approximately two years of study, this option was set aside due to language in the State Statutes that put constraints on the project and its viability. As a result, officials from both counties agreed that moving ahead with the proposed project was not in either county's best interest. A comparable project in southern Wisconsin, involving 4 or 5 counties pursuing the joint Huber option, was shelved when similar issues arose.
- ❖ As early as 1997, the county was advised that the new jail was over capacity and the shipping of prisoners to other county jails in nearby counties began in 1999.
- ❖ In 1999, the Kimme Study was commissioned and completed. The final study report recommended building a 200-bed facility at a location just south of the current Law Enforcement Center. This proposed new facility would have been connected to the current courthouse using an overhead walkway over Strongs Avenue. As part of the study's recommendations, a total of 11 houses would have been removed in order to build the new facility. This aspect of the plan's recommendations was met with a great deal of negativity and ultimately made the plan implausible.
- ❖ At about the same time, the county worked with the architect who designed and built the current county courthouse building. As part of this project, the architect looked at adding a third floor to the building, along with filling in other portions of the building to provide for a square configuration. While these options were plausible, they had serious limitations and were deemed inadequate for addressing long-term space needs. In addition to these limitations, additional land would have had to have been purchased to provide for parking and streets on the north and south sides of the building would have had to have been closed. Future expandability of any site chosen for a new justice center is a necessity,

and must accommodate growth over a period of 50 years or more.

- ❖ In 2003-04, the DLR study was completed. This study looked at all space needs in county government departments, including those departments that comprise the justice system. The study recognized a number of space needs and recommended that the county address space needs in the circuit courts as well as in the jail. Courtroom security is a serious concern in Portage County, and standards for courtroom design and security have changed over time, making retrofitting the current courtrooms problematic.
- ❖ With space need recommendations for both the courts and jail contained in several studies commissioned by the county, the Portage County Board went on record in 2005 supporting the collocation of the courts and jail in any future building project. This decision was made to address operational efficiency and safety issues in the justice system.
- ❖ The Goldman Study was commissioned in order to complete a needs assessment process for all justice center/system related functions. The Goldman Study forwarded recommendations for all departments envisioned to be housed in a new justice center facility, and asserted that any new facility must be flexible, expandable, and accessible over a projected life of at least 50 years.
- ❖ Venture Architects was hired by the county to complete a pre-design phase of the planning project by the end of 2007. This project will project space needs for all justice center functions and will identify potential sites for the new facility. As part of the project, cost estimates will be developed for both the facility and its operations. A final report to the County Executive and County Board is expected by late 2007 or early 2008.