

**JUSTICE COALITION ADVISORY COMMITTEE
RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING
NEED FOR A NEW PORTAGE COUNTY JUSTICE CENTER
FEBRUARY 14, 2006**

Charge to the Committee:

In spring 2004, the Portage County Justice Coalition established the Justice Coalition Advisory Committee. On June 22, 2004, the Advisory Committee was given the following charge by the Honorable Thomas T. Flugaur, Chairperson of the Justice Coalition:

“To establish community and political consensus concerning the purpose and location for a County jail/courthouse or law enforcement/justice center; to include examination or review of need, alternatives and economic impact of such a project...”

A copy of the charge to the Advisory Committee appears at the end of this report as Attachment 1.

The Advisory Committee interpreted its charge as having two major parts. The first was to make a recommendation on the need for a new justice center. That is, to answer the following question: does Portage County need a new justice center?

The second part of the Advisory Committee's charge was to make a recommendation on the location for a new justice center in the event that it first recommended a new center and the County Board of Supervisors approved a resolution in support of a new justice center.

The current report addresses the first part of the Advisory Committee's two-part charge.

Committee Membership:

The Advisory Committee was first established in June 2004 and had fifteen members. In June 2005, four additional members were included on the Advisory Committee's roster and four more members were again added to the Advisory Committee's roster in winter 2005. Most recently, four members were added in January 2006. Members were added to the original list of members as the Committee recognized the need for a broader base of citizen input on its charge.

A copy of the Advisory Committee's membership appears at the end of this report as Attachment 2.

Committee Agendas and Minutes:

The Advisory Committee agreed to meet monthly on the fourth Tuesday at 4:00 p.m. For the most part, the Advisory Committee met on the designated date and time.

Justice Coalition Advisory Committee agendas and minutes are available for review at the Portage County Planning and Zoning Department.

Mission and Vision Statements:

The Advisory Committee adopted the following Mission Statement for Portage County's justice system:

Achieve justice for the community, victims, and offenders through effective and appropriate responses to crime and its prevention. Decision-making will be based on collaboration, cooperation, objective data, and proper stewardship of resources.

The Advisory Committee adopted the following Vision Statement for Portage County's justice system:

Justice that ensures community values.

Recommendations:

The Advisory Committee's recommendations address three aspects of the justice center project. The first recommendation addresses the question of whether or not Portage County needs a new justice center (including jail and courts). The second recommendation addresses the question of whether or not the Stevens Point Police Department should be collocated with the Portage County Sheriff's Department in a new justice center. The third recommendation addresses the question of whether or not personnel in Portage County's justice system should expand the current level of interventions for offenders.

With regard to the Advisory Committee's recommendations, it is important to note that they come from the citizen members of the Committee. They do not represent in any way the opinions of Committee members who are elected officials in City or County government.

Recommendation One:

The Advisory Committee is persuaded that Portage County needs a new justice center (jail and courthouse). Therefore, by consensus of the citizen members, the Advisory Committee recommends a new justice center as proposed by the consulting team of Mark Goldman and Associates (MGA). This recommendation does not imply, however, that the Advisory Committee endorses all of the particulars that are included in the consultants' proposal for a new justice center. This point is further clarified below.

The Advisory Committee members have become generally acquainted with Portage County's justice system. Members toured the jail and courts. The judges, sheriff, jail staff, and other invited experts/service providers also spoke at Advisory Committee meetings. Some Advisory Committee members also visited contemporary justice centers in Wisconsin that, because of their design, are recognized for operational efficiency.

From a global perspective, the Advisory Committee learned that the current jail is grossly overcrowded and that situation will only get worse in the years to come. Because of the overcrowding, inmates are being transported to other County jails for incarceration, which is costly and inefficient (e.g. for court appearances). Advisory Committee members also learned that the physical layout of the current jail is very labor intensive (i.e., high number of staff required to supervise a given number of inmates) compared to the physical layout of jails constructed today.

With regard to the courts, the Advisory Committee learned that the space devoted to court and court related proceedings is grossly inadequate for even the needs of today. As with the jail, the crowding situation in the courts is also projected to get worse as more and more cases are adjudicated in the years to come. Because of the increasing workload, the County has been encouraged to begin identifying space to locate a fourth circuit court in the next several years. No reasonable person could begin to identify adequate space in the current County/City building for one more courtroom and its related space requirements (e.g., offices, jury deliberation rooms, etc.) without relocating many other offices to another building – a building that does not exist.

The current court facilities have also been reported to lack proper security measures. For example, they do not limit access to the courts through a single entrance and, prior to entering the courtroom, they do not separate defendants from the accused from the general public. It is not unusual to see an inmate being escorted through the public hallways of the County/City building as he/she is moving between the jail and the courtroom. In addition, it has been pointed out that it is very unsafe for the public to have inmates escorted across a street to get back and forth between the jail and the courtroom.

Much of the information that the Advisory Committee received is included in the report from MGA, the consultants retained by the Portage County Board to study the need for a new justice center. (The report from MGA may be viewed at www.co.portage.wi.us. Click on "Justice Center Planning Project" located on the left hand margin of the homepage. You will see an introductory letter and under that letter is a link to the "Portage County Justice System Needs Assessment Study and Plan Draft.")

It has been demonstrated that Portage County's justice system has a critical need for a new justice center. The puzzling question is how Portage County can afford the consultant's projected cost for a new justice center (estimated at \$60M to \$63M) without raising property taxes and/or jeopardizing other important projects on the County's "to do" list.

Portage County's Finance Director spoke to this issue at an Advisory Committee meeting. He anticipates the County will have reserves in the amount of approximately \$8M to support the justice center project. On that assumption, the County would need to borrow about \$55M to cover the remainder of the estimated cost of the project. The Finance Director reported that the County's levy for debt service would remain at about 64 cents per \$1,000 dollars of assessed value for most of the 20 years of a \$55M debt. However, he noted at that levy rate there would not be any funds remaining to support other important County projects (current or future) during that period.

Thus, we have opposing forces. On the one hand, there is a critical need for a new justice center. On the other hand, the consultants' (MGA) projected cost for a new justice center (\$60M to \$63M) may not be acceptable to Portage County residents. For these forces to be resolved in a win-win situation, creative ideas and difficult decisions will be required. The Advisory Committee encourages the Portage County Board to examine alternatives such as the following to control cost:

1. Re-examine the consultants' cost projections for departments/offices that the consultants have identified to be included in the new justice center. Perhaps, departments are included in the proposed facility that could be housed in the current County/City building when the courts are moved to the new justice center without significantly jeopardizing operational efficiencies.
2. Include in the project's cost estimates the ongoing staffing and building operational expenses. The majority of these costs are staffing as projected in the consultants' report, which shows an increase of more than 90 staff from 2005 to 2025. Staffing changes of this magnitude will have a huge impact on the annual budget of Portage County's justice system. The budget will be much larger than it is today and annual operating expenses will further increase the size of that budget.
3. Perhaps, the capital equipment needs identified for the justice center can be pared back. For example, in the case of functions/departments that will be located in the new facility, capital equipment might be grouped into "essential to the mission of the unit", or "important but not essential to the mission of the unit", or "nice to have but not critical to the mission of the unit". Such a grouping would allow for prioritization of needs, and thereby, allow for a control on spending.
4. Perhaps, as with capital equipment in item two above, space needs identified for the various functions/departments in the justice center can also be reviewed against a "need scale". As above, the scale might be from "essential" to "important but not essential" to "nice to have". This too can allow for a control on spending.
5. Perhaps, jail beds (juvenile and adult) that are not initially needed by Portage County could be made available for rent/lease to other counties. Then, as time passes and Portage County needs these rented/leased beds for its own purposes, they could be reclaimed.
6. Perhaps, the justice center could be constructed in phases. For example, it may be reasonable to construct the physical shell for some parts of the facility without finishing them until the space is needed five, ten or fifteen years into the future (e.g. the fourth courtroom, some jail beds, etc.). While the total cost would not be any less, the debt for construction would be carried over more years, thereby decreasing the debt burden at any given point in time.
7. Perhaps there are opportunities for partnerships beyond the proposed partnership between the Stevens Point Police Department and the Portage County Sheriff's Department (see recommendation two below). For example, perhaps there are other governmental offices (e.g. state or federal) to which space could be rented/leased in the vacated portions of the current County/City building and/or the current jail (including the Sheriff's Department). Arrangements like these would provide a new revenue stream for Portage County. And, depending on the siting of the project, other law enforcement services in the County may also benefit from collocation within a new justice center.

Recommendation two:

The Advisory Committee is persuaded that appropriate personnel should continue to pursue the possibility of collocating the Stevens Point Police Department and the Portage County Sheriff's Department in a new justice center.

The Advisory Committee did not devote significant time to a discussion of the pros and cons of collocation. However, Committee members have learned that from a fiscal perspective, the consultants have demonstrated that significant savings could be realized in construction costs, if the two law enforcement offices/functions are collocated in a new justice center. Therefore, from this perspective alone, there is merit in further examining collocation, particularly in light of the fact that the Stevens Point Police Department is outgrowing its current space. However, for this collocation to be successful in day-to-day operations, it is important that the sworn officers in each of the two units also support it.

Furthermore, in the process of further examining the possibility of collocation, the Advisory Committee assumes that efficiencies will also be studied to identify savings in operational costs. For example, what impact, if any, would collocation have on the operation of the Dispatch Center or on law enforcement's ability to respond to a major disaster (e.g., large industrial fire/explosion, multi-vehicle accident on a busy road/street, tornado, etc.). Perhaps, administrative savings could also accrue from collocation.

Recommendation three:

The Advisory Committee is persuaded that the Portage County Justice System personnel should continue to examine additional interventions, particularly for individuals who are repeatedly convicted for criminal behavior. Interventions that are shown to reduce recidivism and that are cost-effective should be implemented.

The Advisory Committee heard from many different directors about the programs they offer to the inmate population in Portage County (e.g., Portage County Jail programs, Portage House, Day Report, Electronic Home Monitoring, Probation and Parole, Oxford House, etc.) and from a recognized expert on intervention for people with AODA issues (Dr. Stan Stojkovic, Dean and Professor, Helen Bader School of Welfare, UW-Milwaukee). These are reported in the Advisory Committee minutes.

The Advisory Committee learned that there are many intervention programs in Portage County today and that each director of a program is dedicated to his/her program's success. Yet, recidivism is a fact of life in Portage County. In fact, MGA's report notes that in one recent survey of Portage County inmates, all of them had been in the County jail at least one time previously. In addition, the consultants report that in the same survey more than half of these inmates indicated having been incarcerated in another jail/prison at least once previously.

In view of the continuing problem of recidivism, which is certainly not unique to Portage County, all efforts should be made to identify and implement cost-effective intervention programs that reduce it. Dr. Stojkovic, in his presentation to the Advisory Committee noted that recent developments in medications (including medications still in the experimental stage) and behavior therapy, when tailored to the individual, can reduce the rate of recidivism due to alcohol and other drugs. Since abuse of alcohol and other drugs accounts for a significant number of Portage County's inmates, intervention programs of these types should be included in an examination of cost-effective programs.

The consultants have also included in their report a list of interventions that Portage County could implement in the hope of reducing the population of Portage County inmates. We assume that list will be studied and interventions that are cost-effective will be implemented.

Summary:

Advisory Committee members have come to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the Portage County Board's study of the need for a new justice center. After having heard from a wide variety of individuals who are involved in the justice system in Portage County or elsewhere, and after reviewing the consultants' needs assessment report, the citizen members on the Advisory Committee conclude that the need has been demonstrated. Similarly, these same members have heard compelling evidence to support collocating the Police Department and Sheriff's Department, as well as implementing additional cost-effective intervention programs.

Citizen members of the Advisory Committee also recognize the implications for other County capital proposals given the projected cost of a new justice center. It is in light of this recognition that the citizen members of the Advisory Committee have offered for the Board's consideration a list of suggestions to manage this cost. The list is not to be considered exhaustive. Perhaps it can serve as a starting point to which other ideas will be added as discussions on this proposed project continue.