

New Facility Q&A

The Aitkin Independent Age has recently reported on the planned Aitkin County facilities project. The Aitkin County Board of Commissioners would like to answer a few of the most common questions regarding the project. Information will also continue to be posted on the Aitkin County homepage.

Q: Why does the County need a new building addition?

A: One of the main reasons for building an addition is to address current security concerns. The new building will separate court-related functions from general government functions. Those entering the building for court, probation services or attorney services will pass through security screening. Emergency exits will also be included in the county boardroom for the safety of staff and visitors.

Efficiencies will be realized by grouping departments that work closely together, creating better work flow and reducing citizen's time spent finding their way to the correct department. Locating certain departments next to each other will allow more cross-training among staff and will result in labor cost savings while allowing the sharing of staff during high traffic periods resulting in faster service for the public (i.e., absentee voting assistance by the Auditor's office, property tax payment times for the Treasurer's office and busy periods for the License Center, etc.).

The existing infrastructure is in need of repair and does not adequately address the space needs of most departments. This includes the County Boardroom that cannot accommodate large citizen groups.

Rental expenses for the License Center and Soil & Water Conservation District will be eliminated by bringing these departments under one roof.

The current structure is not accessible. Seniors and Veterans struggle to visit county departments due to the various elevations at the courthouse. The new addition will house the Veteran's Service Office and the License Center on the first floor with easy access near the west entrance. All public spaces will be fully accessible.

Q: Why not build a less expensive building?

A: Several building options have been explored over the past 10 years. In 2009, Kane & Johnson Architects were hired to complete a space needs study. Based on the results of the study, discussions with county staff, Commissioners, and facility committee members, a building plan was designed that balances the goals of the County Board to create an efficient, accessible, and secure space with the smallest impact on taxpayers as possible. The estimated costs of the building project are based on square footage, regardless of a stand-alone facility or attached facility, and will be funded by a \$10.215 million Capital Improvement Bond. This is the maximum amount to be funded however costs may be lower. Options will be explored in an effort to keep the bond below \$10 million if possible. Additional grant funding has been applied for that may reduce the amount bonded.

Q: What will the project cost taxpayers?

A: Annual costs are as follows:

Homesteaded residence valued at \$100,000	\$20.04
Homesteaded residence valued at \$200,000	\$50.04
Homesteaded residence valued at \$500,000	\$140.04

Commercial property valued at \$250,000	\$119.04
Commercial property valued at \$1,000,000	\$999.96
Seasonal property valued at \$200,000	\$56.04

Q: How much debt does Aitkin County currently have?

A: As of 2016, Aitkin County is one of only 13 Minnesota Counties with no debt payments. The 10-year average percentage increase in county levy is 2.6% for 2007-2017, lower than our eight neighboring counties.

Q: Will there be a vote by Aitkin County citizens to approve the bond?

A: Under MN Statute 475.521, capital improvement bonds are not subject to election requirements unless a petition is signed by voters equal to five percent of the votes cast in the municipality in the last municipal general election. A petition was received, however after subtracting duplicate signatures, non-residents, non-registered voters, and illegible signatures, the five percent threshold was not met. Holding a referendum that is not legally required will not only result in a cost of approximately \$37,000-\$111,000, it may increase the overall costs of the project with changing interest rates and rising building costs. With current low interest rates and unwavering resolve regarding the current needs of the county, the Board of Commissioners has chosen to move forward with the project.

Q: How has communication of this project been shared with Aitkin County citizens?

A: Many articles have been published in the Aitkin Independent Age over the past 10 years related to this project. In September of 2016, the City of Aitkin held a public hearing to vacate the street next to the courthouse in preparation of the project. Most recently, a public meeting and public hearing were held to gather citizen input. Sheriff Turner has spoken about the project on KKIN radio and County Administrator Jessica Seibert presented information to Aitkin County townships. Information is also located on the homepage of the Aitkin County website. Information will continue to be shared as the project progresses. As always, County Commissioners and staff are available to answer questions also.