

County moves ahead with design for new jail, 911 center

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Reinert dissenting. Commissioner Julie Braastad, who chairs the Public Safety Committee, was absent. The contract could cost up to \$13.2 million.

In a second 4-2 vote the board approved a \$4 million contract amendment with ICS for construction management services for the project. ICS has helped the county select an architecture firm as well as coordinate work between the architect and county departments. The amendment is for continued support as the county and Wold Architects enter the second phase of project design.

For the second phase of the project, Wold will further prepare designs, coordinate bidding and make sure all necessary codes and regulations are followed.

"Signing this does not say we're finalizing the project completely," Cory Kampf, the county's Finance and Central Services Division manager,

said. "There will be other decisions along the way. ... This allows us to begin the final design process, which is going to take probably close to a year for some buildings, a couple years for the jail itself, but a year as we look at the parking ramp, as we look at the 911 facility."

If at any point the board decides not to continue with Wold Architects on the project, only the money spent up until that point will be lost, Kampf said.

"This is a long process, it's a four- to five-year process," Kampf said.

It would be wasteful for the board to spend nearly \$18 million on a project and then back out, Reinert said.

"It really does green light the project," he said.

Reinert worried the board was rushing into the contract amendment without having enough time to think it over. The board had 11 days between reviewing the site plan and approving the contract amendment. The project

has been in the works for about four years.

The commissioners didn't receive a copy of the site plan until the work session, Reinert said, so there wasn't time to review it prior to the work session either.

He moved to continue the conversation to a later date, a motion that ultimately failed 3-3. Commissioners Look, Reinert and Robyn West voted in favor.

"This isn't something I think that we want to rush," Reinert said. "Of course, some would argue a four-year process isn't rushing it. We really did just get the information we need to have a real good discussion 11 days ago."

Meisner later moved to suspend the contract amendment vote to Oct. 26, when Braastad will be in attendance, but that motion failed 3-3. Meisner, Reinert and Look voted in favor.

Look wanted the opportunity for taxpayer input regarding the project.

"I absolutely think that

they need to have a say in this," Look said.

He considered putting the measure on a ballot because the total project could cost upwards of \$300 million.

Look also proposed raising sales tax to match neighboring counties, with a set end date to revert back to the current sales tax.

"Keep in mind, sales tax isn't always paid by Anoka County residents," Look said. "People passing through Anoka County are buying things, paying sales tax."

Raising sales tax would require state legislative approval, Commissioner Scott Schulte said.

Look said he hadn't yet seen sufficient evidence that the jail needs replacing in the first place.

"I want the proof that this facility is going to get shut down if we don't build a new one," Look said.

Sheriff James Stuart said Look will not see a written report that says

that, but he's heard verbal comments from the Department of Corrections about the need to improve the jail. Stuart also said he's had concerns about the jail and whether it's suitable for inmates and staff since he was first elected.

Not only does the jail lack sufficient space for all its inmates, but the COVID-19 pandemic has shown it isn't made for quarantining or any sort of medical and mental health care, Stuart said.

"We have an outstanding team in that jail managing liability, doing the best that they can with a facility that was designed for literally half of the inmates that are allocated for it and working within an infrastructure that is radically undersized and outdated," Stuart said.

He said when the jail was built in 1983, it hardly suited the needs of the time, let alone the needs of today.

It was designed for 140 inmates. Many of the rooms are now double

booked, Schulte said. The county has sent inmates to other counties due to lack of space at the jail.

Commissioners Mandy Meisner and Mike Gamache agreed that taxpayers should be more informed of the project, but they weren't necessarily in favor of a referendum.

Gamache said bonding is a suitable tool for the project, because paying off the debt would affect future residents and not just the ones living within the county at this time.

"We're going to have more population, we're going to have more people coming in, and they should pay for it in the future," Gamache said. "That's why we bond."

Schulte sees the new jail, 911 call center, parking ramp and work house as an investment the county needs to make. He compared the current facilities to a vehicle, where if the maintenance costs are adding up to more than the car is worth, it's time to get a new one.

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Local restaurants are still shorthanded and asking why

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industry], putting a shortage on a table, it just breaks your heart," she said.

"It most definitely has not gotten better," Metro-North Chamber of Commerce President Lori Higgins said. "Restaurants are still suffering the same issues in terms of a shortage of labor. You see indi-

cations of that everywhere you go. You see signs on the doors. You see reduced hours. You see people asking for patience."

The question businesses are asking is why — but it's hard to know for sure, and it's likely a combination of factors.

"They're scratching their heads," Pete Turok, president of the Anoka

Area Chamber of Commerce said.

Some business owners he's talked to believe it's just too soon to see the impact of the enhanced unemployment benefits disappearing. It hasn't been that long since the final checks went out, and some people may be living off the money they saved up.

Jeanne Boeh, an eco-

nomics professor at Augsburg University, said in an email that even with enhanced unemployment benefits ending, other payments, such as the child tax credit and federal COVID-19 aid programs, mean households have had other resources not obtained via employment income. Families appear to have saved some of this

money, she said, citing data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis that shows the personal saving rate dramatically increased in 2020 and 2021.

"This may mean that they can afford to be out of the workforce while they seek less stressful and personal contact positions," she said.

Boeh also pointed out

that women were overrepresented in the service industries — such as restaurants, nursing homes and hotels, which are all having difficulty hiring — and that child care expenses have increased and K-12 schools haven't had a stable schedule.

With the highly contagious delta variant of the coronavirus circulating, Turok said there's probably also a slice of the workforce that is simply not comfortable returning to work yet.

Higgins said some people in the industry went into new lines of work after finding themselves jobless last year.

The so-called labor shortage is also driving up the price of labor. Stone is now paying kitchen staff \$15 to \$20 an hour.

"There's so many jobs that they can go and get a job anywhere," Stone said. "They want top dollar now, and people are paying it to get them in."

Most of the jobs at Pizza Ranch pay \$13 to \$16 an hour, Hubin said, but people still want more.

"There's definitely a widespread perception that people are worth more than whatever I offer," Hubin said. He added that some prospective employees probably could go get another job with higher pay — but others seem to overestimate what they can earn without solid experience.

"It's all these factors that have led us to where we're at, and where we're at is it's tough," Turok said. "It's a tough time for businesses to get employees in the door."

On top of that, many restaurants are facing supply chain issues and rising food prices, Higgins said.

"That is also contributing to the stress they are experiencing," she said.

That doesn't mean restaurant owners are giving up.

Hubin said he's at least cash-flow positive this year, unlike last year, and he's still trying to make a positive difference in the world.

"I've always been a glass-half-full kind of guy," he said.

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