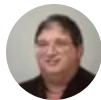


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VENICE

North Port needs a new police station, but Hurricane Ian could complicate financing

North Port residents still dealing with cleanup after Hurricane Ian increased insurance premiums are leery of a new capital project.



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NORTH PORT – Rapid population growth has squeezed North Port's police department into a space crunch. Hurricane Ian could put the city into a financial bind as it tries to solve the problem.

North Port has decided to look for land to build a new police station to replace the current one at 4980 City Hall Blvd., built in 2006 as part of a new city center campus. It's the first step in a long process that will include identifying how to pay for the building, with a strong possibility voters will be asked to approve borrowing money as soon as November 2024.

The earliest construction would begin is 2026.

The money could be a major challenge, especially with many residents still making home repairs after Hurricane Ian and scrambling to come up with money to pay skyrocketing homeowners insurance premiums.

Rebuilding hurdles: North Port moves to make it easier for homeowners to rebuild in flood zones

New subdivision: West River Village includes Playmore Road connection to River Road

“While we support the police and appreciate the police, we can't take more taxes,” resident Linda Knapp said during public comment. “Please don't add more taxes.”

Several emails read into the record during public comment echoed the thought that it's not time for the city to consider a major new project.

North Port Mayor Barbara Langdon called the new police station a top priority, which means other projects will have to wait.

“We need to have some really difficult conversations with our community,” Langdon said. “We need to have some really tough decisions on how to proceed:”

Why does North Port need a new police station?

When the current 32,400-square-foot structure was built, North Port had 47,000 people, and a police force with 79 sworn officers and 30 civilian employees.

Accelerated population growth after the Great Recession – fueled in part by a building boom in Wellen Park – has the city poised to pass the 84,000 mark in 2023, while the department has 131 sworn officers and 49 civilian employees.

Dean Roberts, with the national architectural firm McLaren, Wilson & Lawrie, Inc., called that unprecedented growth compared to all the other studies the firm has done. Roberts told the City Commission North Port could eventually need at least three times the current space.

Related: North Port opens new \$13 million public safety complex in Wellen Park

Earlier: Downtown Wellen Park starts to come alive

According to the University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research, North Port should reach 87,542 people by 2025, and 118,107 in 2035, with almost 215,000 by 2055.

Projections call for an increase in police calls and more officers as well – 162 sworn officers and 65 civilians in 2025 and 265 sworn officers and 106 civilians in 2035.

After comparing the cost of expanding the current facility vs. building a new one, the commission opted for new construction, which would leave the current facility available for other departments to grow.

The city of Venice used that strategy when it opened its new police station in 2020, with a portion of its public works department moving to the old one.

North Port police turn closets into offices

The police department already uses 47,917 square feet of space in six places, including the new public safety facility in Wellen Park. Spaces in the main station that were closets in 2006 are now offices.

By the year 2035, the study projected that the police department would need 89,570 square feet of space and 103,118 square feet by 2050.

North Port Police Chief Todd Garrison has been pointing out the need for more space since he was hired in 2018, noting the need especially for evidence storage. Garrison and Deputy Chief Chris Morales also asked about renting for storage during the 2020 budget process.

How much will a police station cost?

Roberts cited a range of \$90.3 million to \$106.2 million for construction of both a new police department and emergency operations center. The EOC is expected to cost about \$10 million to \$11 million.

He also gave projections for a 2030 start that tacked \$20 million to \$25 million on that estimate.

How would North Port pay for a police station?

City Manager Jerome Fletcher said the money to pay for the new facility will come from a variety of sources, including impact fees and cuts elsewhere in city spending.

Other sources include a portion of the one-percent sales tax revenue, property taxes and an increase in an electric utility tax. All could be used to pay off a sale of bonds that would have

to be approved by voters.

Moody's Investor Services improved the city's bond rating from Aa3 to Aa2 in February, which means the city could save finance costs on future bond sales.

Voters just approved an \$80 million bond to resurface a portion of Price Boulevard that will be paid off by a portion of the one percent sales tax.

City officials had also contemplated asking voters to approve a bond to fast-track repairs of the city's water control infrastructure, much of which is more than 60 years old.

What North Port commissioners decided

The commission unanimously approved building a new facility and authorizing city staff to find land for it, ideally at least 10 acres in the center of the city, with Commissioner Pete Emrich suggesting it be near the Toledo Blade Boulevard corridor.

The board also unanimously authorized Fletcher to bring back funding options.

On a 4-1 vote with Commissioner Debbie McDowell in dissent, the board earmarked \$4 million to buy the site and pay for 30% of the drainage and construction plan.