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## NPPD looking for new HQ to match growing needs

City Commission authorizes search for land, funding options

By FRANK DIFIIORE Staff Writer

Mar 13, 2023



North Port is currently in the early stages of searching for a new police headquarters, with city staff citing the limits of the current HQ located at 4980 City Hall Boulevard.

IMAGE PROVIDED BY NORTH PORT

**NORTH PORT** – The North Port Police Department is searching for a new home to keep up with the city’s population.



The City Commission has authorized staff to begin researching future sites for construction of a new NPPD headquarters, as well as begin initial negotiations for an eventual purchase.

During the meeting, commissioners stressed that any final purchase agreement would require the Commission's approval before moving forward.

Chief Todd Garrison and Deputy Chief Christopher Morales both appeared at the City Commission's special meeting March 2 to make the case for a new or revamped police headquarters.

They were joined by Dean Roberts of McClaren, Wilson, and Laurie Architects, to lay out the exact challenges North Port will be facing in the coming decades.

The current headquarters, located at 4980 City Hall Blvd., is a two-story building encompassing 32,400 square feet. The building was constructed in the early 2000s and entered service in 2006.

Since then, North Port's population has nearly doubled — growing from roughly 47,000 in 2006 to about 84,000 projected for 2023. The NPPD has also grown in that same time period, going from 79 police officers to 131 and 30 civilian employees to 49.

Roberts said that the building performed admirably for a smaller town, but an increase in population will likely make a larger police department necessary.

“You didn't outgrow it this year. You did that years ago,” Roberts said.

The NPPD currently utilizes some satellite facilities to accommodate for their larger size, including the PD-2 building, the public safety complex at Wellen Park, and the PD storage space at Public Works. All of these facilities plus the current headquarters brings their total work space to a total of 47,917 square feet.



Roberts projected that current growth rates would put North Port with a total population of approximately 118,000 by 2035; to keep pace, NPPD would likely grow to a size of 265 officers and 106 civilian employees.

That would ultimately come down to a need for approximately 104,000 square feet by 2035, with more square footage required to match long-term growth expected by 2050.

McClaren, Wilson, and Laurie Architects — which specializes in the design of public safety buildings — subsequently undertook studies and surveys of NPPD staff to account for the needs of a growing police department. The firm also looked to other cities, such as Cape Coral and St. Petersburg, for planning and projection.

Roberts and the NPPD ultimately came down to two options: expand the current police headquarters to match future needs or begin preparations for an entirely new facility to match future projected size.

Total costs were largely projected to match, with construction in 2026 projected to come to between \$90 million and \$106 million.

Roberts said that the extra costs in building out the current headquarters would come from needing to find temporary workspace while the expansion is done, as well as the hardening requirements to reinforce an existing structure.

City commissioners asked Roberts and city staff about what properties would be available for new construction and how the city could structure the finances to afford the ultimate price tag.

Staff noted that at least 10 acres would be needed to accommodate the new facility. City commissioners rebutted that the new facility should keep relatively close to the center of the city and avoid taking areas off the tax rolls.



“I can’t see us taking a commercial property off (the market),” Vice Mayor Alice White said.

City Commissioner Debbie McDowell offered repeated questions and comment regarding the funding structure, including NPPD and City Manager Jerome Fletcher’s initial figures of \$4 million toward the purchase of land and initial design costs.

“I can’t approve something if I don’t know where the money is coming from,” McDowell said.

Fletcher responded by emphasizing that his staff were only asking for permission to begin preliminary negotiations and would not be authorized to sign any deal without explicit approval by the City Commission — an interpretation backed up by City Commissioner Phil Stokes.

“There is no commitment to spend \$4 million,” Stokes said.

There was relatively little public comment at the meeting. A few residents said that while they supported NPPD and believed it was necessary to secure a new building, they were cautious about the ultimate price tag and risk of more taxes being levied on people still recovering from Hurricane Ian.

“So please don’t add more taxes on top of already stressed people,” local resident Linda Knapp said during public comment.

The City Commission ultimately voted unanimously to build a new building and to authorize Fletcher and his staff to begin preliminary negotiations and to come back with funding options for the project.

A separate motion to authorize 30% design of site, drainage, and construction — contingent on successful property purchase — was approved by a vote of 4-1, with McDowell dissenting.



The commission also decided to shelf a motion to place a general obligation bond for the 2024 general election season, citing the need to know the full range of funding options before making that decision.

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