

New Facilities For Police, Fire Considered

The North Wilkesboro commissioners discussed options for new facilities for the fire and police departments during a work session Thursday night.

Jim Powell of ADW Architects, the Charlotte based firm hired by the town to study the matter, presented three choices to the commissioners during the meeting.

They were:

- renovating and expanding the former Wilkes County Women's Detention Center on Boston Avenue for use as the town's primary fire station and maintaining the existing fire station on Ninth Street at a cost of about \$3.32 million;
- building a new facility for both the police and fire departments on 19.5 acres along Second Street at a cost of \$6.7 million;
- building a new facility for both departments where the former Elk's Lodge building now stands near the intersection of Finley Avenue and Second Street, at a cost of \$7.8 million.

Powell also presented options for maintaining a police station in downtown North Wilkesboro.

Boston Avenue facility

Powell said the sturdy construction of the 3,374-square-foot former women's detention center, originally a juvenile detention center, increased the cost of renovating the facility.

The proposal for the former women's detention center includes adding an additional 5,400 square-foot structure to provide space for trucks and other equipment.

The proposal also included converting inmate cells into seven bedrooms and renovating its two bathrooms to make them handicapped-accessible. A small kitchen would be added in the middle of the building, so it would be surrounded by the bedrooms.

The building was originally a juvenile detention center.

Powell said the former detention center would need certain improvements to meet higher building code standards if converted into a fire station.

Powell said the building wouldn't work well as a police station, but it would work well as a fire station.

North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Jimmy Martin raised concern about the plan for the Boston Avenue facility not having enough space for a training room.

Martin said that because the current fire station's training room is too small, North Wilkesboro firefighters must leave the county for certain training. He said that means they can't all train together because that would leave the town unprotected.

Martin said the fire department didn't need seven bedrooms.

Combination facilities

The other two proposals call for having the fire and police departments share a facility.

Powell said he recommended the site on Second Street, which he said has the advantages of being flat and having room for expansion. His proposal for this site calls for a 24,000-square-foot facility.

The town would have to buy the property on Second Street, which also adjoins Euclid Avenue and J and F streets. Lack of visibility from Second Street was an issue for Martin, but not for North Wilkesboro Police Chief Joe Rankin.

Although the proposal for the property where the former Elk's Lodge building now stands calls for building a 24,000-square-foot facility. Powell said there wouldn't be room for expanding the facility in the future.

Although it is the most expensive of the three, he said, it has prominent visibility.

Both proposed sites for a combination facility allow for multiple exits/entrances for vehicles.

Current police station

Powell also analyzed the current police station on Main Street.

His company conducted an analysis of the building in 2010, and Powell said little has changed since then. He said the building isn't meeting needs of the police department.

He said the police department needs about 13,100 square feet of floor space, but the current police station has 8,320 square feet.

The building, the former town hall, was built in 1939. Powell said most public buildings have a life span of 50-70 years before major renovations are needed.

The ADW analysis noted the lack of secured fenced-in area for police vehicles and insufficient evidence storage space, including no space for large items kept as evidence.

The analysis also noted the lack of storage areas for gasoline items and evidence needing to be refrigerated as well as lack of an area for bloody clothes to dry.

The analysis noted the lack of separate private and public entries, that the current police station only has one interview room (which isn't soundproof), no holding room for detainees and no processing room.

Keeping a downtown facility

Powell said there are three options if the town wants to retain a police facility presence downtown.

The first option would be to renovate the existing police station. Powell said this would be very expensive and still wouldn't adequately meet needs of the department.

Powell said that unless over 10 percent of the existing facility was renovated, it wouldn't have to be improved to higher building code standards, but they would likely have to renovate more than 10 percent.

He estimated the cost of renovating the building at around \$3.75 million, not including the cost of space for the police department during the renovation.

A second option would be to renovate the current police station and add another two-story building in the adjoining parking lot. This would give the force more space and a better layout, but wouldn't provide a secure place for police vehicles. He estimated the cost of this option at about \$6,100,000.

The third option would be to renovate the front 1,100 feet of the building into a satellite facility and move the rest of the police force to an existing building or a new building.

The satellite facility would have a touchdown desk for an auxiliary officer, three or four desks with computers for reports and a soft interview room to allow investigators to meet with the public. This renovation would cost \$175,000.