

## ***Frequently Asked Questions - Dickinson County Justice Center***

**Why should I have to pay for this project?** A county jail is the property of the people. It is the first line of defense in detaining those people that are deemed too dangerous to be out in public in our society. Whether it's the worst terrorist or the habitual speeder, every person arrested in our nation is first taken to a local jail, therefore they need to have the ability to detail the worst criminals. As a county it is our responsibility to operate our jail in the safest and securest way we can, and it is the responsibility of the local taxpayers to foot the bill for that service.

**Why has this come up now and why do we need to do this?** This is not a new problem. In the early 1990's, then Sheriff Carl McDonald publically stated there are issues with our jail and the courthouse. In the mid 2000's Sheriff Curt Bennet also stated there were problems with the jail then, and even did a minor retrofit to the front office and booking areas to make them safer. Nothing was done to the main cell block or to address the issues of inmates going to and from court in the public hallway because there was nothing that could be done. Now Sheriff Hoffman is indicating the same problems persist. The current jail has a capacity of 38 beds and has been running at full capacity for years. The courthouse and jail are 61 years old and have plumbing, HVAC, and electrical issues, and the original windows do not seal and are very inefficient making utility and maintenance costs high. The most critical is that the location of the jail in respect to the courtroom is such that inmates have to walk down the public corridor to get from jail to court and back. Very dangerous and unsafe to the employees, public and inmates.

**What are the electrical and plumbing issues?** Electrical problems include not enough outlets and circuits that are over loaded and blowing breakers frequently. Water line leaks in the ceilings due to aged pipes, and sewer lines that are rotted causing the ongoing odor of sewer gas in the building, which at certain levels can be hazardous to the employees. These pipes are 60+ years old and are deteriorated.

**Why can't we just renovate and get by with what we have?** The current jail design is not ADA or PREA (federal standards for jails) compliant and cannot be made so. It's size and way it is built is simply not big enough to make the changes that would be needed, plus it would cost way more too even try than building new. Then we would still be stuck with an old facility at a new facility price.

**What are the problems with the current jail?** Safety and security issues in the existing jail include 60 year old cell doors with bad lock mechanisms that cannot be repaired, jail doors that will not lock, door's that will not activate properly. The linear design prevents staff from being able to monitor activity in the cells and open areas of the jail. All of above expose the jail staff to unnecessarily risk's and danger's they should not be subjected to.

**If taking inmates down the hallway is so risky, why can't you take them a different route to court?** Due to the design of the building, there is no other way to get from the Jail to the larger courtroom without going down the public hallway. Also, the judges must walk through the public hallway to get to their bench for court, all of which is dangerous. There is no other way to get there.

**Why is it dangerous for Judges to walk in the hallway?** By the nature of the work, Judges are required to make decisions about people's freedoms, their families and children that are not always popular and being forced to walk through the very people that they just dealt with can be very dangerous to the safety and wellbeing of them and their staff members.

**Have you checked into just building a whole new facility and not wasting money on the old courthouse?** Yes. Building a totally new facility would be cost prohibitive and we as a county simply could not afford that cost. The current courthouse structure is very solid and just needs to have some minor updates to make it usable and efficient for the next 50+ years.

**What about building a separate jail at another location, has this been looked at?**

Yes, the option of a new facility was discussed. There are a number of functions that come at less cost if the facility was connected to the courthouse, to include computer and phone services and sharing computer networks, backup power systems, phone systems, and staff to maintain them. Having the jail and the Sheriff's Dept at the same location is critical for management and operations. Also one of the goals of the project is to have the jail and courtrooms under the same roof so that inmates do not have to leave the facility to go to and from court hearings and we can have one security checkpoint for both the courthouse and jail, whereby preventing us from hiring more security guards and needing more metal detectors. Backup power systems also play a big part in keeping everything together and sharing these systems. Custodial and maintenance staff can also be shared if the facilities are joined. The list of benefits goes on and on.

**I don't want to pay for a new courthouse and then pay for a new police department too. Why won't the City of Abilene commit to being in on this project?**

The City of Abilene recognizes that they have issues with their police offices and their municipal courtroom. They have met with County officials and looked at the options of partnering on the project. Until recently, they did not know what the final estimates would be for them to lease space in the courthouse. The Abilene City Commission has passed a resolution declaring their intent to be involved in this project that will save the Abilene taxpayers millions of dollars.

**What would you do with the space where the jail and courts are currently at?**

The county attorney's office would come into the courthouse, and their old building would be removed. The Abilene Police Dept would also occupy the area where the jail is currently eliminating their needs for office space and providing them with direct access to other law enforcement functions like the jail, county attorney's staff, and court.

**Why is the new justice addition so big? Can't it be sized down some to save some money?** Research over the past 20 years tells us what the daily population of the jail typically has been. That coupled with the growth of the county, provides us with a good forecast for what we will need in the future. From this research the experts tell us that a 65 bed facility will provide us the space we will need in the future, and provide the ability to segregate and manage the population adequately. Also, the new addition is proposed to be built on one level rather than two like the existing courthouse, whereby reducing the costs of elevators, stairwells, and construction. The single story facility covers more square feet on the ground, but at less of a cost than building upward. So, even though the pictures look larger, the cost is less than building a two story structure.

**If the Police Dept moves to the courthouse, what would they do for a courtroom?** The City of Abilene would share one of the new district court courtrooms that would have state of the art technology, and be available for their use. The real bonus is that the courtroom would be next to the jail and inmates would be brought to court without having to pull a police officer off the street to take the inmate across town to and from court exposing the city and the officer and inmate to increased costs and risks.

**Why are the costs estimates so high? There must be less expensive options?** By the nature of the design, jails are expensive to build. They are much more than a normal building. They have to be tough enough and designed to keep the worst members of our society inside, while we are safe outside. The costs are high because of all the metal cells, electronic controls and monitors and spaces that are needed to make them safe for the inmates and the staff. The federal government through the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) of 2013 spell out what the minimal requirements are for jail construction. Options of other sites, other buildings, and many options were all discussed and considered over the past couple years. Building on the current site, using the designs that are in place was the most cost effective and efficient long term solution.

**Why the rush now?** Two things are for certain. We will always have a need for a court system in our society and will always have a need for a county jail. These problems are not going away. A big part of any cost for a project like this is the cost of borrowing the money to do it. Interest rates for municipal bonds have been at historical lows over the past 6 months, and are slowly starting to rise. Interest rates are not an exact science, so nobody knows for sure what they will do, but one can reasonably expect them to continue to increase in the future. Getting these low interest rates locked in on this project now would save the county taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars if not millions of dollars over the life of this project. Therefore, time is critical if we want to take advantage of the low interest rates.

**So just how much effect do the interest rates have on the cost of this project?**  $\frac{1}{2}$  of a percent raise in interest on \$17 mil equates to an increase of \$80,000 per year on the bond payment, or millions of dollars in increased cost over the life of a 34 year bond

**Do we have to borrow all the money to pay for this project?** No, the county recognized these issues years ago and implemented a 2 mill tax in 2013 for this project. Since that time, that tax has generated \$1.4 mil in funds that can be used towards the project, requiring us to only need to borrow \$15.9 million.

**So if this is approved, how much will my taxes increase to pay for it?** With the moneys that are already in the budget for this project, and some funds that will be received from other sources that are coming off exempt status in the next year or so, we are very comfortable knowing we can make the bond payments for this project at today's prices, **with no tax** increase to the taxpayers as a result of this project. That certainly does not mean other issues outside of this project will not cause increases in the future, but once these interest rates are locked in, our bond payments will be the same for the life of the bonds and will not increase.

**So why so expensive?** Three years ago this project would have cost \$13 mil. Due to increases in construction being roughly 6% per year average, the project is now estimate to be \$17 mil. A year from now those costs will increase another 7%, so delays in the project simply allow for increased costs.

**I find it hard to believe my taxes won't increase?** We know we can repay the bonds for this on what we have today for revenue sources. That certainly does not cover any future increases in costs for other things like roads and bridges, ambulance services, 911 costs, Sheriff's functions, costs for Health services, etc. Any or all of these may increase in the future resulting in tax increases or decreases. The only thing for sure is that locking in the cost of the justice project will allow for a set dollar amount each year that would not increase over the life of the bonds.