

## **Synopsis of Planning for the New Allegan County Jail**

The following is a historical perspective in regards to the chain of events, studies and related activity that were started in reference to locating a new jail and sheriff's facility for Allegan County. In actuality, there were two studies done in the late 1990's in reference to the same subject matter of location of a new jail and sheriff's facility. Those studies will not be referenced. The verification of those studies cannot be made.

A number of groups and professionals have participated in the process to date. They include:

Three paid professional consulting firms –

- DMG Maximus (recommended moving jail/sheriff operations to Dumont Complex)
- VRJS (NIC PONI process)
- Nederveld Associates

Three unpaid consultants -

- Michigan Municipal Risk Management Authority (MMRMA) - Bill Page
- Construction Control Inc. (CCI) - Mr. Jack Krause
- National Institute of Corrections (NIC)

Four committees -

- Law Committee of the County Board of Commissioners
- The Planning of New Institutions (PONI) Committee
- The Justice Complex Committee
- Professional Services and Funding Workgroups (Facility & Funding – newly-organized)

Through all the work, analysis, time and energy, the consultants and committees came to different conclusions as to the actual "site", but they all had a common thread in the final findings of their work. The common thread was that although the downtown current site was extensively evaluated, that it should not be considered because the sizing and functionality requirements could not accommodate the required functions of the current jail needs, future jail needs, and Sheriff's Office operations, which included the Law Enforcement components of the Sheriff's Office. Countless staff hours, both from the Sheriff's Office, County staff, and other related organizations have been dedicated to this process. The process is now in its fourth rendition. If any project has been given due diligence, it is this one.

In late 2001 the Law Committee, chaired by Commissioner William Sikkel, embodied the recently commissioned Sheriff-Community Relations Advisory Board to develop probable locations for a new jail facility. The committee consisted of William Sikkel, Sheriff Koops, Max Thiele (representing the County Commission), Bart Shaw, Marsha Fisher, Pastor Harriette Portrum (representing SCRAB), Steve Schulz (representing Allegan Township), Lisa Sutterfield (representing the City of Allegan), and Judge Stephen Sheridan (representing the District Court). Several meetings commenced and subsequently, there was a vote of the committee to request that the County enter into

negotiations with the Intermediate School District to procure approximately 30 acres behind their current site. All present voted in favor of requesting the County to move in this direction. This information was forwarded to the Law Committee through William Sikkel, the Law Committee Chairperson, and on to the County Administration, who subsequently could not come to an agreement with the ISD as to property value and purchase. Still, the recommendation was to move to a site that could accommodate not only current needs, but future needs for the Sheriff and Jail complex.

Justification for new facilities continued to be collected. Justification included a study completed by the Michigan Municipal Risk Management Authority. Mr. Page's analysis concluded that the current facility lacked the ability to accommodate new correctional structures. Secondly, the National Institute of Corrections (N.I.C.) in Longmont, Colorado (which will be mentioned later) also completed an independent study and recommended that the current facility at the current site not be considered because of the restrictions that were inherent in the downtown site.

As indicated earlier, the DMG-Maximus study commissioned in late 2001 recommended that the current facility be razed and a new facility be constructed at the Dumont Complex.

A grant was obtained from the National Institute of Corrections to send a team to Longmont, Colorado to the Planning Of New Institutions (PONI). Sheriff Koops, Jim Hull (the Jail Administrator at the time), and Marc DeVries, County Finance Director, represented the County as the planning team.

The PONI process included 6 phases. These included establishing the needs for new facilities, to identifying key stakeholders, justification for the process, location, construction and occupation. Jail facilities are complex facilities and construction costs typically only reflect between 10 and 15% of the overall cost of a facility over a 30 year period, thus it is extremely important that the original structure be operationally efficient. The N.I.C. also recommended securing the services of a professional criminal justice facilities planner because of the complexities of the issue.

Interestingly, at the PONI session, Grand Traverse County was also represented. They had already identified their facilities planner and that individual attended with them during the session. Subsequently, they have constructed and occupied that facility since approximately 2004. As indicated earlier, the N.I.C. study concluded that analysis was correct; that the current facility did not meet modern correctional standards and should not be considered for additional future capacity.

The County Commission, by resolution, adopted the PONI model for criminal justice facilities.

Through a very aggressive process, a number of nationally recognized criminal justice planning firms submitted proposals to be considered by the selection committee, which included members from the Purchasing Department of the County, Facilities Management, the Sheriff's Office, the SCRAB Committee, and County Commissioners.

A fully-vetted process ensued and subsequently, VRJS was selected as the County's criminal justice planner.

The PONI process began.

Key stakeholders were identified, which included the Sheriff, Sheriff's Office personnel (Law Enforcement and Corrections – those who would be using the facility), a city representative, County Administration, County Facilities, County Finance, County Commissioners, the Prosecutor, District Court (Judge Sheridan), and Circuit Court Administration (Mike Day), along with our planner, Mr. Jim Robertson from VJRS Consulting. They were charged with bringing a recommendation to the County Board.

An option had been obtained on the Patmos property, as was recommended by Commissioner Thiele. Subsequently, there were 12 options considered, which included doing nothing, staying on the same site, building new on the same site, going to the Dumont property, building a whole new criminal justice complex, building just Sheriff's Administration, building just a jail, and a regional concept.

Part of this process is to garner public opinion and input from a number of town hall meetings. These meetings were held at various locations including Allegan Township Hall, Otsego Township Hall, Dorr Township Hall, and Laketown Township Hall.

After much research about the sizing of the facility, for both current and future needs, receiving the public's input, the County Commission's input, and County Administration input, a recommendation was made for what was then called "Option #5". This option was a 240-bed facility with a Youth Home on the other end of the facility using common services, such as laundry, kitchen, and medical, serving as the buffer in the middle. The option also indicated that the facility should be located on a Greenfield site. The downtown site could not accommodate the needs as identified.

After a discussion at the County Board level, a vote was taken by the County Board and a resolution was passed to direct County Administration to work with the Criminal Justice planner and the Sheriff, Facilities and the local units of government to identify a proper site. Subsequently, the Patmos property was identified as a suitable site and was recommended for the future facility.

Subsequently, a millage proposal was developed. It was recognized early on that a millage election for a jail would be a hard sell, and at best, there was only about a 25% chance of a success rate. A grassroots organization of interested citizens began to organize, calling themselves "Citizens for a Safe and Secure Allegan County". They began to organize legally and collect funds for the ensuing public information and education campaign. During the first meeting, there was between 25 and 30 people attending from across the county. Subsequently, the County Board of Commissioners decided to add a "quality of life" component to the millage request.

Two issues arose.

First, a local representative wrote an article opposing the Youth Home as being part of the solution. Although the local representative did not talk to any of the stakeholders on the committee that we are aware of, he formed an opinion outside of the information that had been garnered prior to the millage request.

Second, the “Citizens for a Safe and Secure Allegan County” requested in writing from the County Commission, a definition of “quality of life” so they could explain it during the millage campaign. No response was ever received.

Subsequently, the group withdrew their support of the millage, and the millage campaign was cancelled.

Contrary to what has been reported in the local press, these were the issues why the millage was withdrawn, not the facility location.

Approximately 5 months passed when a group of county commissioners, including Max Thiele, Randy Brink, Don Black, Lou Thierwechter, and Steve McNeal, proposed the downtown waterfront site. After 4 more months of discussion, the county commission established a committee known as the Justice Complex Committee to “work out the differences of the opposing groups”. Thus, the JCC was born. During their organizational meeting, members of the JCC, which included 4 county commissioners, the Sheriff and the Undersheriff, voted to make the recommendation that all decisions had to be unanimous. This, and of itself, was a feat to accomplish. The work ensued over an 18-month period to the work you see today. The committee evaluated and visited over 30 sites in and around the City of Allegan. In addition, the committee visited other jails in Michigan and Indiana.

It should be noted that another site that garnered great attention was the Rockwell site. To this day, it is unclear what legal and technical issues surround the Rockwell site. Still, one fact did become abundantly clear: the County’s liability carrier, Michigan Municipal Risk Management Authority (MMRMA) was contacted for its analysis from a risk-liability aspect. Their response was that maybe the site could support a building, but MMRMA would not insure it or any operations at the facility on the Rockwell site.

The City of Allegan, at a City Council meeting, indicated to the Sheriff they did not want the jail downtown.

Subsequently, Nederveld Associates was requested to develop an RFP for two sites, Patmos and the riverfront (downtown) site. The cost to complete the analysis was \$39,200 for the riverfront site and \$10,200 for the Patmos site. The RFP and subsequent analysis were never procured.

Through formal communication, for a second time, the City of Allegan indicated they did not want the jail on the waterfront. Mr. Jack Krause was solicited at the request of Commissioner Thiele to give his opinion about the current options of staying on the current site and looking at other sites. After review of the information and coming to the

conclusion that the bed capacity should be between 400 and 800 for future growth, he recommended that the committee should not look at any property that had less than 10-12 acres minimal.

The membership of the JCC also changed during the process. Commissioner Thierwechter resigned because of a possible conflict of interest on one of the researched sites. Commissioner Thiele also resigned for unspecified reasons. Subsequently, Commissioners VanEck and Kapenga were assigned to the committee. During the process, two sites known as #9 and #10 were strongly considered for locating the Jail & Sheriff's Complex. These sites showed strong promise because they would allow for a one-site operation and easy expandability for the Jail and Sheriff's operation.

Still, after many hours of debate and research, and with input from Allegan Township and the Allegan City officials, a unanimous vote of the JCC was passed to move from the downtown site, and furthermore, that the Dumont site be presented to the County Board of Commissioners as a recommendation to them for construction of a Jail and Sheriff's Complex. In a 9 to 2 vote, the County Board voted in favor of the Dumont site. Subsequently, the County Board of Commissioners voted to establish two new working groups which are currently referred to as the Professional Services and the Funding groups.

Also, legal opinion and technical assistance was procured reference to environmental and legal issues at the downtown site(s). This included aspects such as moving a Veterans' Memorial, historical district considerations, parking issues, and land use issues.

Anecdotally, conversations with two former community leaders revealed some interesting details. According to Mr. Harry Smith, a Valley Township resident, and the Allegan County Sheriff during the planning stages of the current facility, the same debate raged in the years of 1959 -1960. The recommendation from the Sheriff's Office and others was to construct the jail away from the downtown for the same reasons cited in today's debate. Contrary to the recommendation, the County Commission decided to build on the current site. The plan for expansion was to build a second floor on the facility – that never occurred. Another discussion with Mr. John Wilson, who was the mayor of the City of Allegan in the 1980's, revealed that he received many telephone calls and had numerous conversations with the residents of the City of Allegan who were outraged and opposed to additional jail space when the County of Allegan decided to expand the current facility to accommodate the growth of the inmate population. According to Mr. Wilson, the sentiment was "Why are you building a prison in the heart of our downtown?"

Allegan County is not unique. Five counties share borders with Allegan County. Those counties are Kent, Barry, Kalamazoo, Van Buren and Ottawa. Of those five counties, four, including Kent, Barry, Kalamazoo and Ottawa, have their Sheriff's corrections and law enforcement operations on remote sites away from the center of any of the cities in their counties. Only Van Buren has chosen to retain its Sheriff's corrections and law enforcement operations in the center of the City of Paw Paw.

Other aspects must also be considered. Although it is aesthetic in nature, it does seem prudent to mention the fact that any new jail structure in downtown Allegan would dwarf the current County Building. The minimum height, by all accounts, would be between 75 and 80 feet in height. The current County Building at its highest elevation is 35 feet. In essence, the new structure would be more than twice the height of the current County Building. The tallest building in downtown Allegan would be the County Jail.

Due diligence in this project has been done, in fact, several times. Through all of the analysis, all the consultants, all the citizen participation and the county board participation, county administration participation, and the Sheriff's Office, one common thread remains: each of these groups may have concluded that the actual site may vary, but every one of them concluded that building the jail on the current downtown site would be impractical, not forward-thinking, and more than likely, much more expensive to construct and operate. It could be further concluded that yes, a facility could be built on the downtown site, in fact; it probably could be built on any site, given enough money and resources to accomplish the task. Still, in all likelihood, this would not be the prudent, economical, and efficient avenue to pursue.