

Justice Center; If Not Now, When?

On the bright side, it appears that everyone now agrees on the need for updated and expanded courthouse and jail facilities in Johnson County. Yet somehow there are a number of factions with competing agendas (some mutually exclusive) who can also agree on one other thing; they want the Justice Center bond issue on May 7 to fail.

It's an interesting mix. One group will vote no to anything that will raise property taxes, period. Another will vote no to any proposal as long as minority contact/racial incarceration disparities exist and/or people continue to be arrested for victimless crimes. Another wants to bid out the jail services to private commercial providers, and two others want a scaled-down facility either located away from - or attached to - the Old Courthouse.

I can appreciate the principled stand of some of them, but what will another delay accomplish? Is there *any* proposal that 60% of them would vote for? It doesn't seem likely.

What does seem likely is that this proposal would be back for another vote soon, probably with only minor changes (again) because the great majority of people who are the most knowledgeable about this issue are convinced that this is the best long-term solution. It's at least 60% of the rest of us who need to be similarly persuaded, and that was very nearly achieved last November on a slightly more expensive proposal.

Opponents are quick to point out that there are numerous alternatives to this project, and the one we are voting on is currently the only proposal that is specific, detailed and has significant backing. What they are not so quick to point out is that they can't agree on any other plan. That point can't be overemphasized; without consensus there will be no change.

At some point, practical considerations must trump ideological concerns and I submit that we are already well past that point. That's not to say that ideological concerns are unimportant.

I was talking to a woman last week who said she would vote against any project that included a jail for the same reasons she voted no last November and the time before that in 2000; because we continue to arrest people for marijuana possession and use. Those laws are up to our Legislature, not the County; she'll probably still be voting against proposals in 2025 if necessary.

Going back even farther, some of us can remember the bond issue for the current jail built in 1981; it also passed on the third try. It also was scaled back significantly in the design phase by the "existing needs only" lobby, using many of the same arguments you hear today. Not surprisingly, it quickly exceeded capacity and the Sheriff at the time reported overcrowding just five years later. Most of us expect a little more longevity from our major capital investments.

What's frustrating is that the people with primarily social justice concerns are working against the people with primarily infrastructure concerns when that does not need to be the case; we can have it all. Let's fix the things that we can right now – then put 100% effort into others.

We have an efficient and effective proposal in front of us that will give us the facilities we desperately need in the shortest amount of time. It will also be able to support what could become the most progressive county justice system in the state, if we demonstrate the will.

Please vote Yes for Justice.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons is hoping for a good voter turnout on May 7, because it's gonna be a close one.