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## Police building program bungled in Kansas City

In 2010 Kansas City voters enthusiastically renewed a 15-year sales tax to upgrade the Police Department with new facilities, modern technology and better maintenance of current buildings.

In mid-2013 that effort is being undermined by inaccurate cost estimates and poor communication among top city and police officials.

Who erred? The blame is spread all around City Hall and the Police Department. In coming weeks, officials including Mayor Sly James, City Manager Troy Schulte, city capital improvements leaders, the police command staff and police commissioners need to work together to get these projects completed more efficiently.

Among key findings by The Star:

- Building a new crime lab and East Patrol station together in the central city — along with renovating Police Headquarters downtown — will cost at least 41 percent more than once predicted. The new tab for these projects is \$100 million, up from \$71 million.
- To help pay for the more expensive crime lab/patrol station, the city plans to borrow an additional \$14 million. A financial spreadsheet the city provided Thursday shows this debt will drain an added \$1.4 million a year in public safety sales tax revenues. Essentially, the city expects to have to slash other police upgrades approved by voters in 2010. Among potential cuts: maintenance for police facilities, technology enhancements and new police vehicles.
- To help pay for the ballooning costs to rehab Police Headquarters, the city diverted \$6 million in bond funds that voters had approved in 2010 for a new North Patrol station.
- Overall, the money available for the new North Patrol facility has plummeted from the \$17 million proposed in 2010 to just \$9 million. City and police officials now aren't sure where or when the station will be built. That concerns Northland City Council member Russ Johnson, who said he was promised a new station would be built in the part of Kansas City in Platte County.

In a series of interviews in recent days, city and police representatives offered a variety of explanations, excuses and defenses for what's happened since voters extended the sales tax, which raises \$16 million a year.

We understand: When public projects go awry, everyone seeks to put their best foot forward. And there's no love lost between some city and police officials, given recent squabbling over everything from health care to pensions to local control of the Police Department.

But no one comes close to making a compelling case that everything has been properly handled.

For example, the original cost estimate of \$57 million for the crime lab/East Patrol station suddenly had escalated past \$80 million in figures worked up by city officials earlier this year. They then scrambled to offer different alternatives that included huge cuts to the size of the crime lab. That led police board members in June to criticize the city's new \$74 million budget for the project.

When asked about the long time it took to get the most recent cost estimate, Schulte conceded: "Should we

have known it earlier? You bet." Still, he says citizens will get a great crime lab, even though it could be at least 25 percent smaller than the police want.

Police board president Lisa Pelofsky counters that she hopes to be creative by getting grants or tax credits to help build a bigger lab. But the city controls the budget, so the police need to make a winning case at the July 23 board meeting that such a facility is essential to the city's crime-fighting efforts.

Another weak argument holds that the near-doubling of costs to renovate Police Headquarters is partly because it's an old building with unforeseen problems, including mold. That's a tired refrain. Old buildings always seem to have problems. The city architect's office and police officials should have expected in 2010 to deal with them in 2013.

It was especially disheartening this week to hear public officials such as City Council member Ed Ford, police board member Angela Wasson-Hunt and former police board president Pat McInerney tell The Star they hadn't been told by the city staff about key parts of what's been happening with public safety revenue.

Miscommunication breeds mistrust, most notably among the people who ought to be best informed on use of public dollars.

Kansas Citizens deserve better than they have gotten so far when it comes to keeping promises made almost three years ago to wisely use millions of sales tax dollars to improve the Police Department.

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