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A bigger crime lab is best for KC's future

Kansas City has only one chance to properly build a modern crime lab that will serve residents for the future.

However, the city's current plan for the facility is undersized, underfunded and unacceptable.

At a meeting Tuesday, the Board of Police Commissioners needs to stand firm in its insistence that residents deserve the kind of crime lab they were promised — and they overwhelmingly voted for — in 2010: A large facility that can help police more quickly solve crimes and better serve the public.

Police board members, with the assistance of the City Council, must dedicate themselves to find the extra money that would help construct a right-sized lab. That could be up to an additional \$6 million, although some of it could come from public grants outside the city or private sources.

A crime lab provides essential services for police. It helps all Kansas Citians by solving homicides, other violent crimes and lesser offenses. Crime lab employees use their skills to accurately identify evidence that helps convict criminals, protecting the rest of the community.

When voters renewed the public safety sales tax in 2010, police and city officials pushed the larger crime lab as the centerpiece of their campaign. They correctly noted that the city's outdated, undersized facility of just over 30,000 square feet at 6633 Troost Ave. was harming the department's abilities to quickly solve crimes, as evidence sat for weeks or even months without being analyzed. Officials promised a new lab of more than 70,000 square feet.

Unfortunately, in the intervening years, the city and the Police Department have done a poor job getting the crime lab built on budget, along with a new East Patrol station, on a four-block campus near 27th Street and Prospect Avenue.

A review of documents shows the department underestimated the cost of the lab and the new campus.

Specifically, city officials grossly underestimated the expenses for acquiring and knocking down houses in the area. Delays crept into the process, especially linked to problems associated with the positive effort to help wipe out urban blight and place a new public facility in the city's core.

Two plans are on the table.

- The city is pushing a lab of 54,000 square feet while trying to keep the total construction cost to \$19.1 million.
- The police want a 71,400-square-foot crime lab with a cost of \$24.8 million.

The Star favors the second plan, despite objections from city officials that the police won't need all that space and won't be able to hire enough extra people to fully utilize it. The police board can help its case with the public with a solid plan showing how the space will best serve police needs in the future, and what staff will be required to operate the lab.

As lab director Linda Netzel points out: "It is important to have the space to add new instrumentation. Also, newer technologies may actually supplant the need to add more staff because of automation and robotics."

The politicians and police board members need to find a way to solve the funding concerns without undercutting the mission at hand: construction of a lab that's the best size for this community in the long-term and not one that has to be expanded in the future at an even greater cost.

Mayor Sly James, who's also a police board member, contends the 54,000-square-foot version would be a "very good lab." But that should not be the gold standard.

With quick improvements in all kinds of technological crime-fighting tools, Kansas City should build a lab that will be good for 2023, 2033 and even further into the future.

The city must not compound the budget mistakes already made at the police campus by constructing a lab that breaks

promises made in 2010 to the public.

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