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## Budget cuts shrink plan for a new crime lab in KC

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The Kansas City Star

When Kansas City voters approved an extension of the public safety sales tax in 2010, a \$40 million cutting-edge crime lab served as the flagship project.

The lab soon will be built with a new East Patrol Division station on an impressive 20-acre campus at 27th Street and Prospect Avenue.

But it will likely be a shrunken version of what police originally envisioned.

Buying four square blocks of residential homes and federalizing the project racked up millions more in costs than city officials anticipated. The addition of other features to the campus, including a gymnasium and property and evidence storage, also cut into the overall project's \$74 million budget.

Even though police already had scaled back their planned lab to \$25 million, additional cuts are now necessary, city officials say.

City officials want to slash the size of the lab by 17,000 square feet and cut the cost to \$19 million to help bring the project back into budget. City officials also have proposed eliminating a community basketball court, reducing exterior amenities and trimming the size of the new East Patrol station and the adjoining gym that area residents could use.

City officials delivered the news Tuesday to police board members, who objected to the lab cuts.

"We promised the citizens that we were going to build a state-of-the-art crime lab and we're not doing that," said police board member Angela Wasson-Hunt. "We're renegeing."

But city officials say the reduced lab is what the city can afford.

"It gets us a very good crime lab," said Danny Rotert, the city's spokesman. "Maybe it's a Chevy instead of a Ferrari, but it allows us to live within our means."

Although city officials sought police board approval for the reductions on Tuesday, Board President Lisa Pelofsky tabled the issue for a month to try to come up with other ideas.

The lab originally was designed to be 71,000 square feet to meet the department's needs decades into the future, allowing space for 25 additional employees. But the reduced lab at 54,000 square feet would only meet the department's current needs and allow the lab to hire only three more employees, said Lab Director Linda Netzel. By contrast, Johnson County recently built a 62,500-square-foot lab, which cost \$30.3 million.

A reduced Kansas City crime lab also won't be cutting edge, Netzel said.

She had planned to venture into equipment and testing that could develop unique "fingerprints" that could link drug samples to the same batch or determine a homicide victim's diet and water source.

"New technology could answer other questions beyond identifying somebody," she said. "We could get into fully fledged reconstructions of crime ... but that's going to have to be the first thing to go."

Instead, she said, the new lab will focus on expanding basic services, some of which police haven't been able to deliver because of the cramped quarters and environmental problems in their current 34,285-square-foot

lab on Troost Avenue.

Netzel has had her hopes dashed before. In her eight years as director, she has asked for new employees every year but only has been approved to add three positions. She currently has six frozen vacancies. The lack of manpower has left her with 800 cases backlogged in the drug chemistry unit and DNA samples that take an average of eight months to process, she said.

She said the lab can be seen as an easy place to cut because the technicians work behind the scenes.

“The lab has expensive equipment that no one in the community sees,” she said. “But they see a police car every day.”

City officials said Netzel’s plan to hire 25 employees in the coming decades was unrealistic, which is why they believed the lab could be scaled back.

If the lab fills its six vacancies and hires three more employees, “that’s a reasonable growth rate for the next 25 years,” Rotert said.

But Pelofsky said the city should be devoting more resources to the crime lab because of technological advances that can solve crimes more efficiently than a single officer or detective in some cases.

City officials said they could always expand the crime lab later. But Netzel doubted they would find the money and said an addition would create workflow and efficiency problems.

“You can’t just throw another lab onto the end of a lab building,” she said. “It just doesn’t work.”

Police board member Alvin Brooks said he was upset that other police projects paid for by the voter-approved sales tax increase have come in under budget, yet the lone project in the inner city is over budget.

“There ought to be some way to fix this,” Brooks said. “I just hate to see us scale this down to where it is, when we knew what we needed. This is disturbing.”

The city bought homes from and relocated 66 people, said Assistant City Manager Pat Klein, adding: “It’s not been easy.”

The city decided to federalize the project, which helps employ people in the surrounding area and increases relocation assistance but costs more, Rotert said.

Mayor Sly James, who sits on the police board, said the campus’ costs ballooned because of “decisions to help the community accept this project.”

“This is not a construction issue,” he said. “Our overrun is because of soft costs and decisions we made to be favorable to citizens.”

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