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KC East Patrol crime lab project continues to be a concern

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Kansas City officials acknowledge they knew months ago about the East Patrol project's ballooning cost overruns, even though they informed the police board only late last month.

And they now admit that the \$57 million budget for the project, used to persuade voters in 2010 to renew a public safety sales tax, was just a rough estimate that seriously underestimated the costs of land, design and furnishings. Millions more dollars must pay for those soft costs, reducing the scope of what was promised as a \$40 million, state-of-the-art crime laboratory.

But officials say they are focused now on solutions rather than blame and think they can still build a successful police station and crime lab complex in a four-square-block area near 27th Street and Prospect Avenue.

"I'm not going to second-guess what somebody should have done," Mayor Sly James said when asked how the original \$57 million budget for the East Patrol complex mushroomed to an estimated \$74 million. "It will be a good lab, a very good lab."

But some police advocates remain concerned about what happened to the budget and the consequences for the lab.

"The reductions are frustrating, given that a premier crime lab was such a centerpiece of the campaign," said former police board chairman Pat McInerney. "It's a big mistake and the wrong way to go. For the next two generations to have a substandard crime lab, that's not acceptable."

Councilman John Sharp, chairman of the council's public safety committee, said he remains concerned that the scaled-back lab won't allow the city to deal adequately in the long term with its huge evidence backlog.

"I think law enforcement agencies will continue to rely more and more on laboratory work to solve serious crimes," he said.

Police board chairwoman Lisa Pelofsky said she is not yet willing to give up on seeking more money for the crime lab, possibly through tax credits or grants to organizations that create science jobs.

"It takes months to process a rape case, and victims are left waiting," she said. "This is about where we focus our priorities in policing. To talk about this as a luxury, it's not a luxury."

James said he became aware of the budget problem about four months ago, but it came to public light only after Pelofsky asked for a report at the last board meeting on June 26. She said she wanted to make sure any major cutbacks were discussed in the public's view, so she asked city officials to present their options publicly.

Pat Klein, assistant city manager and the East Patrol project manager, said budget problems were apparent months ago but he knew the full scope of the problem only a few weeks ago, when the final court appeals on land acquisition wrapped up. He said he also rejected some early proposals to deal with the problem, and the best solution only recently came to light.

City officials say they will discuss the crime lab budget again at the next police board meeting July 23, but it's a city project and they have the authority to proceed without police board approval. They remain convinced they now have a good game plan to deal with the cost overruns and still build a high-quality police station and crime lab.

The recommended approach: To supplement the \$60 million in bonds already sold for the project, the city would issue an additional \$14 million in bonds. The quarter-cent public safety sales tax generates enough revenue to pay off those additional bonds, although the additional debt service means cuts to other police needs, such as vehicle replacement.

The new bond money would allow the city to pay all anticipated land, design and other "soft costs," plus build a police station, gym and community room close to what was originally envisioned.

The lab would be 54,000 square feet, down from 71,000 square feet in the original plan but up from the current lab's

31,000 square feet. To build what police originally wanted would require at least \$7 million more.

"This is what we can afford," James said. "It's always great to be cutting edge, but we also have to live within what we can afford."

Lessons learned

The East Patrol police station and lab campus was one of the signature projects touted when the city sought a 15-year renewal of the public safety sales tax in November 2010. The \$57 million project budget was cited repeatedly in documents, both before voters approved the renewal and even in late 2011, after the city had picked the site in an inner-city neighborhood.

The land, bounded by 26th and 27th streets, from Brooklyn to Prospect avenues, required the acquisition of 128 parcels and the relocation of about 60 residents.

Klein said he was not involved in drafting the original budget estimate, and some of those who were are no longer with the city. He said it was simply a rough estimate based on a square-footage cost. It anticipated \$48 million for construction and about \$9 million for land and design. But that turned out to be not nearly enough.

"In October 2011, should we have done this level of detail? The answer is yes. It should have been done. But it wasn't," Klein said.

Land acquisition took more than a year, and some people challenged their payments in court. When those court cases finished just recently, the land acquisition, relocation, demolition and other related costs came to more than \$6 million. Projected design costs now exceed \$8 million. Furniture, fixtures and equipment are now estimated at nearly \$6 million, and utility relocations, consultants and other costs could add several million more dollars.

"The site absolutely cost more than a typical site would," city spokesman Danny Rotert said, adding that money for furniture and equipment was clearly underestimated in the original budget.

Critics of the project said these cost overruns probably were foreseeable.

"They could have saved the taxpayers a lot of money by choosing the site more carefully," said Jacob Wagner, associate professor of community development and urban planning at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, who testified more than a year ago that it was a shame to disrupt an established neighborhood for the project.

"Where the city itself has hundreds, if not thousands, of acres of vacant land, you pick the most vacant, not the most occupied," Wagner said this past week. "They could have picked a better site that would have been cheaper to prepare."

But James and 3rd District Councilman Jermaine Reed are adamant that the site was the best of 25 options studied.

"This is an area of the city that was in crying need of redevelopment," James said. "And it's in the middle of a place where everybody believes has been abandoned and forgotten for decades."

James said the city bent over backwards to pay fair prices to the affected property owners, and he doesn't regret the cost.

Crime lab debate

City officials believe the best option now is to issue \$14 million in bonds and proceed with the revamped project and budget. The debt service on that \$14 million would be about \$1.4 million per year from fiscal year 2015 through 2026.

That \$1.4 million would have otherwise gone for things such as police vehicle replacement, emergency operations center equipment, ambulance replacement and technology upgrades. Those items will still be funded but will have to take a cut each year.

"Now we'll fund them at suboptimal levels," City Manager Troy Schulte said.

City officials said the extra \$14 million will provide a crime lab that can meet the city's future needs, but there is no consensus yet on that decision.

Police planners say they had the crime lab sized correctly the first time.

Cutting the lab is a "compromise you hate to make," said Maj. Sharon Laningham, who oversees the police department's capital improvements unit.

But city officials say building a crime lab to the more expensive original specifications doesn't make sense because the police don't have the funds to staff such a huge facility. The 54,000-square-foot facility can accommodate three

new employees — a far cry from the 25 more that crime lab director Linda Netzel had hoped to hire in coming decades. But city officials say that will be plenty of space because they probably would be able to afford to fill only six lab vacancies and three new positions anyway.

Although he would like to build the original lab, Police Chief Darryl Forté said the compromise is a sensible approach to getting the project done.

“This is an opportunity to show the community we can work together with the city and resolve this,” he said.

Looking at it optimistically, Forté said the smaller lab could provide flexibility for future expansion that could better accommodate technologies that don’t even exist now.

“It’s not doomsday,” he said. “It’s not where we want to be, but it’s still going to be a great lab.”

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