

Upgrade and expansion of police headquarters will improve working conditions and bolster public safety

BY KEVIN COLLISON - THE KANSAS CITY STAR
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A \$21 million renovation and expansion of Kansas City's police headquarters is underway at 12th and Locust streets. KEITH MYERS/KEITH MYERS/THE KANSAS CITY STAR

It's not easy to interview a witness by telephone and take accurate notes when you're sharing a grungy office about the size of a typical bedroom with five other homicide detectives.

And the loud vibration coming from the old air-handling unit down the hall doesn't help either. That steel desk where you work was old when Eisenhower was president, and the dull wood paneling on the walls? Stained, like every other surface, by decades of cigarette smoke.

But such are the "Barney Miller-esque" conditions - the description used by one Kansas City Police Department official - that Detective Leslie Foreman finds at the archaic Police Headquarters building that opened in 1938 at 12th and Locust streets.

"It's outdated and crowded and it's not conducive to doing interviews on the phone because there's no privacy," Foreman said. "All of us are on different phone calls and I'm trying to transcribe a statement while the others are trying too."

But backup is on the way.

The eight-story headquarters, one of several art deco civic landmarks built during the Depression, is undergoing a \$21 million renovation and expansion that when completed in spring 2014 will give Foreman and her comrades plenty of clean, modern space to do their jobs.

The public should benefit too.

No longer will witnesses and victims risk crossing paths with suspects before being interviewed. They won't be forced to sit for hours in stark waiting rooms either. Architects have designed the layout to shelter victims from the accused and give police private places to take their statements.

"The changes will be a great improvement, not just for employees but for the people who find themselves using the department," said Lisa Pelofsky, president of the Kansas City Board of Police Commissioners.

The project includes a complete restoration of the historic headquarters building, including removing a concrete wall built in front of it in the 1970s, rebuilding the original steps and moving a statue that memorializes fallen officers closer to the sidewalk.

The limestone exterior already has been cleaned and new windows installed.

Inside, the granite and marble of the first-floor elevator lobby, which was the most prominent feature in the original design by Wight & Wight, will be restored.

Wight & Wight also designed other prominent 1930s buildings locally including City Hall, County Hall and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

"We'll bring it back to the original, and the ornamental crown molding on the ceiling will be restored," said Reeves Wiedeman, a principal at Helix Architecture & Design, the project architect. "All will be restored to the original design."

Much more than restoration is involved. The original architect may have created a stately exterior for the headquarters, but the 90,000-square-foot interior is a mess.

Bathrooms and heating, cooling and ventilation equipment were scattered at different locations around the floors, leaving a maze of plumbing and duct work. Walking through the floors, the ceilings are choked by a welter of pipes, ducts and bundles of suspended cables that grew more confusing as new technology was added over the years.

Wiedeman said five of the eight floors had not been renovated since 1938, and the last serious renovation work in other sections of the building was done in the 1980s.

To solve the interior layout problem and create more functional work space, Helix has designed a utility tower that will run up the north side of the building. All the restrooms and mechanical equipment will be consolidated there along with an additional stairwell.

The three elevators in the core of the building also will be revamped and no longer will only one lead all the way to the Holding Center where about 90 suspects are being kept at any one time.

“If it broke, you had to take the prisoners to the seventh floor and then take the steps to the eighth floor jail,” said Maj. Sharon Laningham, of the facilities, management and construction division. “You had to take them through human resources.”

Human resources won't even be inside the headquarters building.

That department, along with the fraud and forgery unit and polygraph unit, has been moved to the former J.E. Dunn Construction office building at 901 Charlotte St. The city acquired the property when J.E. Dunn built its new headquarters at 11th and Locust as part of the East Village redevelopment. It's been renamed the police annex.

Freeing that space in the original building will allow the violent crimes units to expand from two floors to three. They'll occupy the top levels of the headquarters below the jail.

“Right now, they're jammed together,” Laningham said.

“The new space will be open and there will be new interview rooms, white boards, and each detective will have a desk. They won't even know how to act.

“They look at these drawings and say, ‘Are you kidding?’ ”

The most visible aspect of the headquarters project will be a new 1½-story annex to the north that will accommodate police commission meetings and other public gatherings. Right now, the police board meets on the sixth floor, an arrangement that makes it difficult for the public to attend meetings.

The 20,000-square-foot community room will accommodate 115 people and have advanced video conferencing equipment and better acoustics.

It also will have a green roof, one of the energy and environmental design features that are expected to earn the project a Gold LEED rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

“I believe we're going to do a modernization that will be more energy and space efficient, and make it easier to update and repair,” Pelofsky said.

“Although it costs money to make improvements, I believe we'll realize savings through these changes.”

An artwork that will be suspended from the ceiling of the corridor between the new community room and the old headquarters will be paid for through the city's 1 percent for art program. Los Angeles architect Rob Ley has won the commission to do the piece.

And in a historic circle of its own, J.E. Dunn Construction Co., the firm that built the original headquarters, has won the contract to renovate and expand it.

The funding for the police headquarters project comes from the quarter-cent public safety sales tax. Voters approved a 15-year extension of the tax in 2010.

In addition to the headquarters, that money will pay for the \$57 million East Patrol Campus project being planned for a four-block area between Brooklyn and Prospect avenues, from 26th to 27th streets.

It was Deputy Chief Jerry Gallagher, the official in charge of the headquarters project, who compared current conditions to those depicted in *Barney Miller*, a comedy from the late 1970s about New York detectives working in a decrepit precinct house in Greenwich Village.

He said it was no joke having detectives “practically stacked on each other.”

“I’m proud of what we’re doing,” Gallagher said. “We’re building a facility that will last 50-plus years.”

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