

\$40 million upgrade of Kansas City's police headquarters is nearly done

BY LYNN HORSLEY - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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The entrance to Kansas City's police headquarters was one area that underwent significant changes during the update, including making the entryway wheelchair accessible. Veterans on the force describe the old building as being cramped and outdated. BRIAN DAVIDSON/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Veteran Kansas City police employees can laugh now when they talk about working conditions at police headquarters, which was like a remnant of a bygone era.

“We really did look like the set of ‘Barney Miller’ on TV,” said victim advocate Jennifer Miller, referring to the 1970s comedy about an old-fashioned, beleaguered New York detective squad. “It was very cramped and cluttered.”

Others describe how detectives shared desks and scrounged places to interview victims and witnesses, sometimes in a hallway by an elevator. The electrical system was jerry-rigged for computers and cellphones.

The public entryway was narrow, with just an old church pew for people to sit on. Elevators broke down frequently, and much of the building hadn't been updated since it opened in 1938 at 1125 Locust St., just east of City Hall.

But all that has changed with a \$40 million renovation and modernization. A ceremony to dedicate the improvements will be held from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday, although two floors won't be finished until early next year.

That price is considerably more than originally budgeted, but planners defend the cost and say it gives the building another half-century of usable life.

“Headquarters was hopelessly outdated,” said Maj. Sharon Laningham, in charge of construction and facilities management. “It was embarrassing and depressing to bring victims, witnesses and visitors into the building.”

Police Maj. Eric Winebrenner, the department’s liaison to the city manager, succinctly describes the old environment.

“It was horrible,” he said while taking part in a tour of the improvements. “It’s so much better now.”

In addition to making the work environment more efficient and comfortable for homicide and violent-crime detectives and other employees, the building is now more convenient for the public. The entryway is wheelchair accessible, and a new police boardroom will double as a community room that can accommodate more than 100 people.

All those elements contributed to major cost overruns. The police headquarters was originally expected to cost between \$24 million and \$28 million, paid out of a quarter-cent public safety sales tax that voters approved in 2002 and renewed in 2010.

City Architect Eric Bosch said the original budget contemplated a partial renovation rather than complete building modernization. As design got underway, Bosch said, planners realized the project scope could not fix the building’s deficiencies or accommodate the expanded public space that were important project components.

So they decided it was better to expand the scope and build the new police boardroom/community space in a little-used plaza area just north of headquarters. The new plan also called for a tower to hold all the mechanical systems, freeing up space in the existing building to make the offices more functional.

“It’s important that when we do a facility, we do it right,” said City Manager Troy Schulte.

Schulte said about half the project’s cost overrun was covered through favorable bond financing, with the city’s good credit rating and low interest rates. But \$6 million is coming from \$15 million that was originally intended for a new North Patrol police station in Platte County.

Schulte and Bosch said that still leaves \$9 million for North Patrol. They think that amount is reasonable because it was enough to build a high-quality Shoal Creek police station in Clay County. The city is saving at least \$1 million on North Patrol because it will build on city-owned land rather than having to buy land.

Councilman Ed Ford, who lives in the district that includes the North Patrol site, said he still has doubts whether \$9 million will be enough.

“I am concerned if there’s more cost overruns,” Ford said. “I would hope the design is as nice as Shoal Creek.”

Despite those concerns, Ford and Councilman John Sharp, chairman of the council’s public safety committee, said the added investment in police headquarters was justified after decades of deferred maintenance.

“It’s been almost 80 years,” Sharp said.

Project design is by Helix Architecture + Design, and JE Dunn is the contractor. Key elements:

- Addition of comfortable victim/witness waiting areas and interview rooms with more privacy and security.
- New offices with adequate workstations for each police squad.
- Wheelchair-accessible entryway and police boardroom/community room that can televise meetings live on the city’s government channel.
- Replacement of all mechanical, plumbing, electrical, computer and telephone wiring systems.

Those changes should address complaints that police and the public had for years, said Brad Lemon, executive vice president of the Kansas City Fraternal Order of Police.

Lemon said that sometimes in the old cramped layout, witnesses from both sides of a case might encounter each other at headquarters. Now that’s less likely to happen.

Miller, the victim advocate, said headquarters now provides a much cleaner, quieter environment, with offices where the doors shut and with partitions that go to the ceiling for maximum privacy. Also, the building has larger offices so family members can more easily join victims.

The only floor that wasn’t redone was the eighth floor, housing the city jail. Officials expect that decrepit space to close early next year when Jackson County starts receiving city detainees in a cooperative agreement with the city.

The headquarters project is among the last major police construction projects under a program that has built a new police academy and several new police stations. A new East Patrol station and crime lab are currently under construction and scheduled for occupancy in early 2016.

The last major project will be North Patrol, to be built at Vienna Road and Northwest Prairie View Road, near Kansas City International Airport. Bosch said construction is expected to begin next summer.

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