

The Pueblo Chieftain

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City breaks ground for new PD

New police headquarters a long time coming, council members say.



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES -- Pueblo Police Chief Jim Billings (right) addresses a crowd gathered for the official groundbreaking for the city's new municipal justice center.

By **JEFF TUCKER**
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

The Pueblo City Council celebrated a day that, by some calculations, has been 20 years in the making.

With brief speeches from City Council members, many thanking the community for its support, city leaders, the contractor and architect of the new police headquarters turned the first official shovel of dirt on the project Monday.

"Anyone who has been in the (current) building would witness the cracks in the floors and walls," City Council President Barbara Vidmar said. "Not only is it a safety issue, but it's holding back the work we need to do. It's no way for a modern police department to work."

The current police headquarters is more than 50 years old, but the road to Monday's groundbreaking has been a long and difficult one.

Councilman Ray Aguilera and Larry Atencio both noted in their remarks that City Council in 1986 initially decided a new police building was needed. Aguilera and other council members also noted the escalating price tag on the building, thanking Police Chief Jim Billings for his patience.

"We had lots of setbacks," Aguilera said. "When we got that money from Excel (Energy) I thought it would be enough to build the new jail, but boy was I wrong."

Pueblo voters approved suspension of revenue limits set forth by the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights to allow the city to collect additional property tax revenue on the construction of Phase 3 of the Comanche power plant to pay for the police building, two new fire stations and three police substations.

But price estimates during the project's design period soared to more than

\$40 million.

The city still will pay more than \$40 million on the total project, though the cost of the police building itself is down to \$20 million.

The city ultimately will spend the \$13 million from the Comanche project on the police building's annex, which will be home to evidence and vehicle storage among other functions.

The city then sold certificates of participation to borrow \$20 million to build the actual police headquarters. At a 5.43 percent annual interest rate, the city will end up paying a total of \$31.44 million on the building over 15 years.

Still, it could have been pricier.

The city considered accepting an interest rate of up to 6.5 percent and looked at financing packages that spread out payments over 25 years, which could have dramatically increased the amount of interest the city paid on the building.

Councilwoman Vera Ortegon made note of that, saying that council had managed to save the public as much as \$18 million on the project.

"Now my plea is to the police officers: 'Don't get too comfortable in your new office and in your new furniture,' " she said. "We need you out on the street."

Councilman Michael Occhiato said he was "tickled and pleased" to finally break ground on the building and thanked the citizens of Pueblo for supporting the project at the polls.

Atencio said the police department deserves a building that is "workable and for the citizens, you deserve the same thing."

Councilman Randy Thurston said the groundbreaking signified a "new paradigm" for the city and law enforcement.

He noted the purchase of new surveillance and red light cameras, the hiring of 12 new police officers next year and a jointly funded DNA analyst for the city and county.

"All this reflects is that it's a bad place for people who are doing bad things," he said.

Police Chief Jim Billings thanked the council for its support, saying that it was the most devoted council to law enforcement of any with which he's worked.

"Thanks to the council for making my dreams come true," Billings said. "This council did not back off and did not get afraid."