

County OKs justice center purchase

Years of arguments and negotiations finally conclude

BY MARA STINE THE GRESHAM OUTLOOK, OCT 19, 2007



CONTRIBUTED GRAPHIC

County commissioners approved the purchase of the justice center site, in red above, concluding a long process that began years ago.

East Multnomah County's long awaited new justice center will be built in Rockwood where a closed bowling alley now sits.

Multnomah County commissioners Thursday, Oct. 18, unanimously approved buying a 3.65-acre chunk of property for a long-awaited East County Justice Center in Rockwood for \$3.5 million.

If all goes according to schedule, demolition of buildings now on the site could start as soon as August 2008, with an opening set for December 2009, said Michael Sublett, head of the county's asset management team.

"I'm elated," said Commissioner Lonnie Roberts, who represents East County on the five-member board of commissioners. "We've been at it for some time, three years, possibly four years, I've lost count." The board vice chairwoman Maria Rojo de Steffey also strained to recall exactly how long the county tried to secure a site. "But one step at a time gets it done," she said after the 4-0 vote. Chairman Ted Wheeler participated over the phone. Commissioner Lisa Naito was absent.

What started as a plan to replace Gresham's ancient one-courtroom courthouse on West Powell Boulevard morphed into an idea to incorporate courtrooms with space for district attorneys, sheriff's deputies and Gresham police. But political infighting and debates — about everything from whether to build the facility in Gresham's Rockwood area to whether to build just a simple courthouse — further dragged out the process. This February, under new political leadership, the board approved plans for a 70,000-square-foot justice center, complete with four to six courtrooms, plus room for district attorneys, Gresham police and sheriff's deputies now working in the condemned Hansen Building off Northeast 122nd Avenue and Glisan Street.

The facility is not a jail, but will include two holding cells where suspects can be held until officers can transport them to the downtown Portland jail. Estimated cost of the structure is \$14.3 million to be paid by selling surplus county property. Since February, officials have negotiated with owners of two Rockwood properties — the 4.14-acre Oregon Flea Market site in the 18300 block of Southeast Stark Street and 3.8 acres on the northeast corner of Southeast Stark and East Burnside streets. Officials targeted Rockwood because as part of an urban renewal district, Gresham has pledged \$2 million to the project. Also, backers believe a justice center will stimulate economic development and lower crime rates. But neither property was perfect. Buying out the lease of grocer who recently moved his business to the flea market could have cost the county \$750,000, Roberts said. Plus there are 90 small businesses operating out of the flea market, some of which may have been eligible for relocation costs.

As for the Stark/Burnside site, it's a bit small at just less than 4 acres and would have been difficult to access. Then this summer, Rockwood Bowling Center Inc. and Rockwood-Stark Center Inc. approached Multnomah County with an offer to sell the bowling alley site, located next to and directly east of the flea market. "And all the sudden we had a location, actually a superb location, drop in our lap," Roberts said. "... Now we have a better location than when we began." The property is home to a closed bowling alley, a shuttered dry cleaner, a KFC and a Taco Bell. Only the Taco Bell is to remain and will lease the property from Multnomah County. Officials are still in negotiations with a woodworking company and a cleaning service in hopes of adding more land to the property for a total of 4.38 acres.

"Not only is it the largest (of the three sites), it is the most usable," Sublett said. The property is uniformly shaped, has easy access to 185th and Stark, a traffic signal and street improvements are already in place and only one business — the laundromat — requires a lease buyout, he added.

"Four acres in an urban infill site and with as little disruption to businesses as possible," Sublett said.

Sean O'Halloran, an attorney with an office on Burnside in Rockwood, said the new justice center "is desperately needed" and called the location ideal. Referring to the Powell Boulevard courthouse, he said, "That inadequate firetrap ought to be razed and bulldozed to the ground." O'Halloran said the facility will attract a wide range of professionals, law enforcement officers and well-paying jobs. "It's a win-win-win situation," he said. "The justice center couldn't get here soon enough."

