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Milwaukee County outlines design and funding approach to replace crumbling Public Safety Building while reducing impact on taxpayers

Updated conceptual design, informed by community and stakeholder priorities, leads to new cost estimate; County leaders recommend funding approach that cuts impact on taxpayers by more than \$400 million

MILWAUKEE — As the Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex project continues, early design concepts are finalized and Milwaukee County has identified an updated cost estimate for replacing crumbling, inefficient courthouse infrastructure with a new building that meets community priorities and needs. A funding approach that cuts the cost to local taxpayers by more than \$400 million has also been outlined.

A structural need, but a generational opportunity

“We are faced with an urgent need. The Public Safety Building has well surpassed the end of its life. The question in front of us isn’t whether we replace it, but when we will do it and how responsibly we can get it done,” **said Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley**. “At the same time, this structural need presents the rare opportunity to make a generational investment in a safer community, greater accessibility, and more efficient services. Milwaukee County can live out our values and priorities without breaking the bank.”

Funding approach to reduce project cost to local taxpayers

The project cost is now estimated at \$897 million, inclusive of planning efforts the County Board has previously committed funding to cover. That total includes:

- Development of final design and engineering plans (*funding previously committed, in part*)
- Operations for interim space and service delivery during construction, including short-term leased spaces and renovations to the Historic Courthouse
- Demolition of the existing Public Safety Building structure
- Construction of a new building to replace the Public Safety Building and a new entry to the Courthouse Complex at the Historic Courthouse to enhance safety and align with State Supreme Court Standards for courthouse design
- Construction of a skybridge to connect the new building to the Criminal Justice Facility, and associated upgrades to the Criminal Justice Facility; the project will not add jail capacity

Rather than asking local taxpayers to absorb the full project cost, the County can continue leveraging funds made available through a 2025 State budget win for Milwaukee County.

That year, the State reconfigured how it funds mandated public safety services in Milwaukee County, offsetting roughly \$20 million in annual local spending. With the County’s 2026 budget, it directed \$15.8 million of those newly-available dollars toward Courthouse Complex planning efforts. If the County continues leveraging funds this way, the cost to Milwaukee County residents will be significantly reduced. During construction, that could mean a local taxpayer savings of more than \$94.8 million. If the County continues this approach to pay down debt service related to project bonding, local taxpayers will save an additional \$316.4 million.

The cost of inaction

Over the years, cost estimates have grown significantly as the true scope of the project has become clear and inflation and construction costs have ballooned. Project leaders estimate delays moving forward would further increase the total cost between \$3 and \$4 million per month.

In the meantime, eroding infrastructure and aging systems have led to expensive emergency repairs, and the Courthouse Complex is the single largest cause of deferred maintenance liability in the Milwaukee County capital project backlog. As of 2024, it was estimated that at least \$334 million would be required to address deferred maintenance, replace major building systems and bring the facility into compliance with relevant building codes – without delivering the safety, efficiency, and service improvements a replacement provides.

Planned construction and renovations will address deferred costs and improve long-term operational efficiencies, including through:

- An annual savings of \$1.25 million in utility costs
- An annual savings of more than \$12.1 million if Milwaukee County reduces felony case disposition timelines to meet statewide averages
- An annual savings on sheriff overtime costs by reducing the amount of staff time required to transport in-custody defendants through secured corridors

“Let me be blunt: doing nothing isn’t free. This building is going to cost us whether we act or not, and every month we wait, that number climbs and the risk of emergency repairs increases. My job is to protect the people who pay the bills, and that means getting a new courthouse built without dumping the whole tab in the laps of Milwaukee County taxpayers,” said Milwaukee County Supervisor Steve F. Taylor, Chairman of the Committee on Finance.

Designing for Milwaukee County, with our community

The Courthouse Complex is a service delivery hub for Milwaukee County. Community members visit hundreds of thousands of times per year. Sometimes visits are by choice or in celebration – to secure a marriage license or birth certificate, to attend a public County Board meeting. In many other cases, there is no choice but to visit – to participate in jury duty; to request a restraining order; to attend or testify in a trial; to do an important civic job as an employee, or for many other reasons.

Designs for a replacement building have been informed by extensive local engagement, industry best practices, and lessons from communities who have undertaken similar projects. In more than 45 workshops and 40 additional meetings, justice-system stakeholders, community partners, and expert consultants identified what this project should address and accomplish.

Out of those community and stakeholder collaborations came a list of priorities for the project:

- Ensure safety and security
- Enhance operational efficiency
- Design for systems outcomes and future adaptability
- Support community well-being
- Promote accessibility and inclusivity
- Plan for financial responsibility and cost efficiency
- Continue stakeholder engagement and communication
- Advance the County’s climate policy

Many of these priorities are translated into tangible elements of the conceptual designs, including with:

- Secure corridors that align with State Supreme Court standards by establishing three paths of travel – one for the public; one for staff, judges and jurors; and one for in-custody defendants
- Expanded space for problem-solving courts, early-intervention programs, and flexible future programming or service delivery
- All criminal courtrooms moved into the new building, instead of being distributed across the Complex, and dedicated spaces for attorney / client meetings
- Dedicated spaces where families or victim witnesses can step away from court to find respite
- A centralized, energy-efficient utility plan that mitigates emissions from the Courthouse Complex and reduces annual utility costs
- Strategically located partnering functions that build efficiencies through their proximity, reducing the staff needed to perform essential services

Additional improvements will include upgraded signage to improve wayfinding and accessibility throughout the Courthouse Complex, the use of technology and virtual resources to improve court operations and access, and social hubs and meeting spaces to improve the sense of community belonging and collaboration.

Design efforts will continue through 2028, with continued stakeholder engagement to validate building operations and user needs. Demolition of the Public Safety Building is scheduled for 2028 and construction of the new building will take place from 2029 through 2032.

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About the Courthouse Complex

Like all Wisconsin counties, Milwaukee County is considered an administrative arm of the State of Wisconsin and is mandated to provide certain services, including judicial services. As a result, Milwaukee County maintains and operates facilities at the Courthouse Complex in downtown Milwaukee.

The Courthouse Complex includes three buildings: the Historic Courthouse (901 N. 9th St.), the Criminal Justice Facility (949 N. 9th St.), and the Public Safety Building (821 W. State St.).

The Public Safety Building must be replaced. It is crumbling, inefficient, and poses risks to community safety and service delivery. The Historic Courthouse and Criminal Justice Facility are also in need of renovations but will not be replaced.

About the Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex (IJCC) project

In 2016, a Milwaukee County Courthouse Advisory Group was created to address critical problems with the Public Safety Building. That group published a report that recommended replacing the Public Safety Building and moving all criminal courts into one facility.

That Advisory Group was revitalized in 2024. In September 2024, Milwaukee County identified a design consultant team that will work in partnership with County officials and secure input from stakeholders in order to design a new building to meet the community's needs. That team includes Gilbane | Cullen, a Joint Venture, serving as the Construction Manager at Risk (CMaR) for the project. AECOM, a global infrastructure consulting firm, was brought on to provide architectural planning and design services. A team from the National Center for State Courts (NCSC)'s Court Consulting Services Division was hired to secure stakeholder input that will help shape the function, programs, and services possible in a new building.

Additional information is available online at <https://county.milwaukee.gov/InvestinginJustice>