

Le Sueur County Justice Center

A special section featured in the August 8, 2019 editions of The New Prague Times, Montgomery Messenger, Waterville Lake Region Life & The Elysian Enterprise.

Lack of space, out-dated buildings leads to new Justice Center

Wade Young
Montgomery Messenger

Years ago, sheriffs for Le Sueur County knew they lacked space in their jail at 88 South Park Avenue in Le Center, and they began talking about expanding their facility.

A letter in 2016 from the Minnesota Department of Corrections to then-Sheriff Dave Tietz set the plan in motion to come up with a solution to several problems.

"There was talk before," said Sheriff Brett Mason. "It (the letter) didn't catch us off guard. We knew we needed to do something."

The letter was a follow-up from a facility tour the state had made of

the Le Center Jail. It stated some things were good (clean and orderly), but it acknowledged what personnel have known for years: the county's building lacked space for programs, recreation and storage. It was undersized for booking/intake, intake change-out and for handling medical situations, among others.

There are different security levels in jail - medium, maximum, work release, mental health, and a separate area for female inmates. In Le Sueur County, due to space concerns, the staff has a hard time juggling to make it work when it has an average daily population of 18 to 25 inmates (sometimes up to 35 prisoners) for just 28 beds.

"We are really struggling due to the number of inmates we have," Mason states.

The DOC letter confirmed the severely undersized space does not meet the current needs and that also brings about concerns for safety.

"This raises safety concerns for staff and persons being processed to the facility. There is only one holding cell, which is across the hall from intake. If there is more than one person brought in for processing, there is no place to put the person while awaiting the booking process," the letter stated.

The existing jail sits across the street from the courthouse, which creates logistical problems for

transferring prisoners, said Mason.

"We don't have any way to securely transfer inmates between the jail and the courthouse," the Sheriff stated. "We don't have tunnels or anything like that. So we walk inmates across the parking lot."

Mason said the jail addition also has blind spots, narrow corridors, lack of space and many other shortcomings.

Study

The county spent years studying options to address the issues. It looked at facilities, made plans on current and projected staffing, and how to deal with current and long-range requirements.

A study identified six possible options. Four of them were options that would have added to the original jail building that was built in 1912 with an addition completed in 1980.

One option considered building off-site. The benefits of building a new Justice Center solves all of the current issues. In addition, Mason believes it improves operational efficiency, public and staff safety, while serving as a one-stop service location for the county's judicial system.

By moving the sheriff's department, jail, building maintenance, court administration, the county

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Design incorporates old and new

Andrea Nelson
Contributing Writer

There's a truth to the old adage "Rome wasn't built in a day" and that same truth can be applied to the new Le Sueur County Justice Center.

From concept to grand opening, the project will have been completed in roughly three years according to BKV Group's Bruce Schwartzman.

BKV Group and Schwartzman, a partner and architect with the firm, have been working with the county since the beginning to make this project go from the drawing board to reality.

Schwartzman said that county officials approached BKV Group to help solve the various issues they faced when it came to the jail and other justice related departments, including safety and space concerns, and help create a master plan for future success.

"There was a lack of space," Schwartzman said. "When the Minnesota Department of Corrections was going to downgrade the jail to a 90-day facility from a one-year facility it created a major operations and cost impact."

The new justice center, he

said, helps to provide and solve long term issues the county was facing.

Schwartzman said the process of creating the building was a tedious process that took collaboration between many people and a lot of time.

"It's all about the process," Schwartzman said. "It's a team effort and (the county) was very involved and engaged."

The design phase itself took between 10 and 11 months, he said.

This included making "thousands upon thousands" of design decisions ranging from what the exterior and interior would look like to making sure all best practice standards and requirements, both state and federal, were met. It also included staying within a set budget.

Schwartzman said early on other justice facilities were toured to help in the decision making process. Aspects from these facilities helped to determine what would and would not work for this facility.

Once an overall design concept was created they focused first on the exterior of the building and developed a series of exercises and 3-D image drawings for the county board to decide upon.

The focus, Schwartzman said, was on creating a facility that looked like a government facility that not only served its purpose but also fit in with the landscape and feel of the government buildings already in the county.

"We took cues from the

exterior of existing (structures)," he said. "It needed to feel like it belongs."

From there the focus turned to the interior, where it needed to be durable, practical and be warm and inviting where it needed to be and austere in the areas where a more formal feel needed to exist.

One particular piece that was requested by the sheriff was that the door be used from the old sheriff's office.

"The sheriff wanted to have a sense of the old into the new," Schwartzman said.

In addition to hiring BKV Group for the architectural aspects of the project, Adolphson and Peterson Construction was hired as the construction manager and lead project builder, who also helped in designing the facility.

Brian Kunz, project executive with Adolphson and Peterson Construction, also said that it was a team effort to figure out what was needed in the facility to make it function in the way it was ideally desired.

In total, Kunz said, the justice center took about 18 months to construct once ground was broken.

He said weather has been the biggest hurdle faced on the project, but that everything else has gone smoothly.

"Every project has its problems," Kunz said. "There weren't many obstacles (on this one). Things went very well."

He said the biggest thing to help bring this project to



Design elements for the new Justice Center include the use of the door from the old sheriff's office into the new sheriff's office.



Photos by Jay Schneider

Thousands of design decisions were made for the Justice Center to make sure all best practice standards, requirements and budgets were met.

completion on time and under budget was that his team was able to get the exterior constructed and enclosed before the winter of 2018. By doing this they were able to eliminate delays due to weather and continue interior work without stopping.

"It was a huge milestone," he said.

Both Schwartzman and Kunz agreed that the new facility is a state of the art facility that features a bit of

the old and a lot of the new. It also solves space issues, addresses safety concerns that are needed in a justice center, and provides long term solutions to issues the county had to tackle.

"This is a state of the art facility that number one makes Le Sueur County safer," Kunz said. "It's a very, very nice building."

"This will serve the county justice system for many years to come," Schwartzman said.

Second floor is dedicated to court system

Jay Schneider
Life/Enterprise

Le Sueur County's Court Administration Department will be a part of the new Justice Center.

Everything having to deal with the court system will move into the new facility's second floor.

Much of what is changing locations will move out of the second floor of the Le Sueur County Government Center in Le Center.

Now, individuals who need

to see multiple people in the court system can do so in one location.

The old set up had a various court-related departments in different locations within the courthouse and the City of Le Center.

Probation agents, who work with individuals charged with felony crimes, have been housed in the House of Insurance building across the street from the courthouse for a number of years, but will now have space in the new facility.

Public defenders also have a location in the Justice Center after having rented space from the county for a waiting room and offices to meet.

"Basically everyone who works on the second floor (in the courthouse) will be moving," Le Sueur County Administrator Darrell Pettis said. "The entire floor will be empty."

The new, second-floor court administration floor will include two courtrooms, two judges' chambers, a clerk and courtroom reporter, two jury deliberation rooms, misdemeanor and felony probation, drug court, public defenders' office, law library, a security officer, and an area for human services.

Victims' Services will also move to the Justice Center, and will be housed on the first floor.

Emergency Management Services will also relocate from the Le Center ambulance garage to the Justice Center, but the department will still have a presence in the ambulance building for storage.

One of the biggest changes the public will see (or not see), is the transportation of the incarcerated to the courtrooms.

The new Justice Center is set up so those in custody can come up through the jail right

**Le Sueur County Justice Center
Second Floor**

- Courtrooms
- 2 judges chambers
- Clerk and court reporter in the judges chamber
- 2 jury deliberation rooms
- Court administration
- Misdemeanor and felony probation
- Drug Court
- Human Services area
- Public defenders office
- Law library
- Court House Security officer (also bailiff)

into a holding cell.

Members of the public heading into a courtroom will go through security screening.

"The biggest change in the courts is security," Pettis said. "To get to the courts floor you will need to go through security, like an airport screening. You will not get anywhere without going through security."

There are two courtrooms in the new facility. Both rooms are a slightly larger than the old courtrooms.

A secure glass "penalty box" area for prisoners who may act out is another security feature in the new Justice Center. (In a typical case, the prisoner and attorney will walk through the door and sit together.)

The Justice Center is set

up to accommodate a third courtroom, if needed in future. Currently, the courtrooms are used four to five



A secure glass "penalty box" area for prisoners who may act out is another security feature in the new Justice Center.

times a week.

A couple other modifications made in the new facility include the addition of office space for Human Services. According to Pettis, child protection employees spend a lot of time in court.

The law library will also be transferred from the courthouse to the Justice Center.

Pettis said due to the massive technical needs of the Justice Center, an IT employee will also be housed in the new facility.

"Our services are much more combined," Pettis added. "People you need to see are now in the same place, in a much more inviting and secure building."

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attorneys, drug court, emergency management, jail, information systems, probation, the public defender, and victim/witness program to a new facility, it opens up much needed space for the other county departments.

Phase 2 includes the remodel of 18,000 square feet in the historical Government Center at 88 S. Park Ave. in Le Center. The Center was built in 1896 and the 1912-vintage "Sheriff's residence" are both on the National Register of Historic

Places.

Mason added by not housing or transporting inmates to other facilities, it will keep tax payer funds in the county.

New facility

The building is just over 90,000 square feet and sits on five acres just south of Highway 99 and East of County Road 11. The \$33 million project includes 40 double-occupancy cells (maximum 80 inmates), courtrooms, county attorney offices, dispatch, a law enforcement center and

more.

Mason said it will include a day room, recreation room, classrooms for programs, an area for worship, and more space for the prisoners.

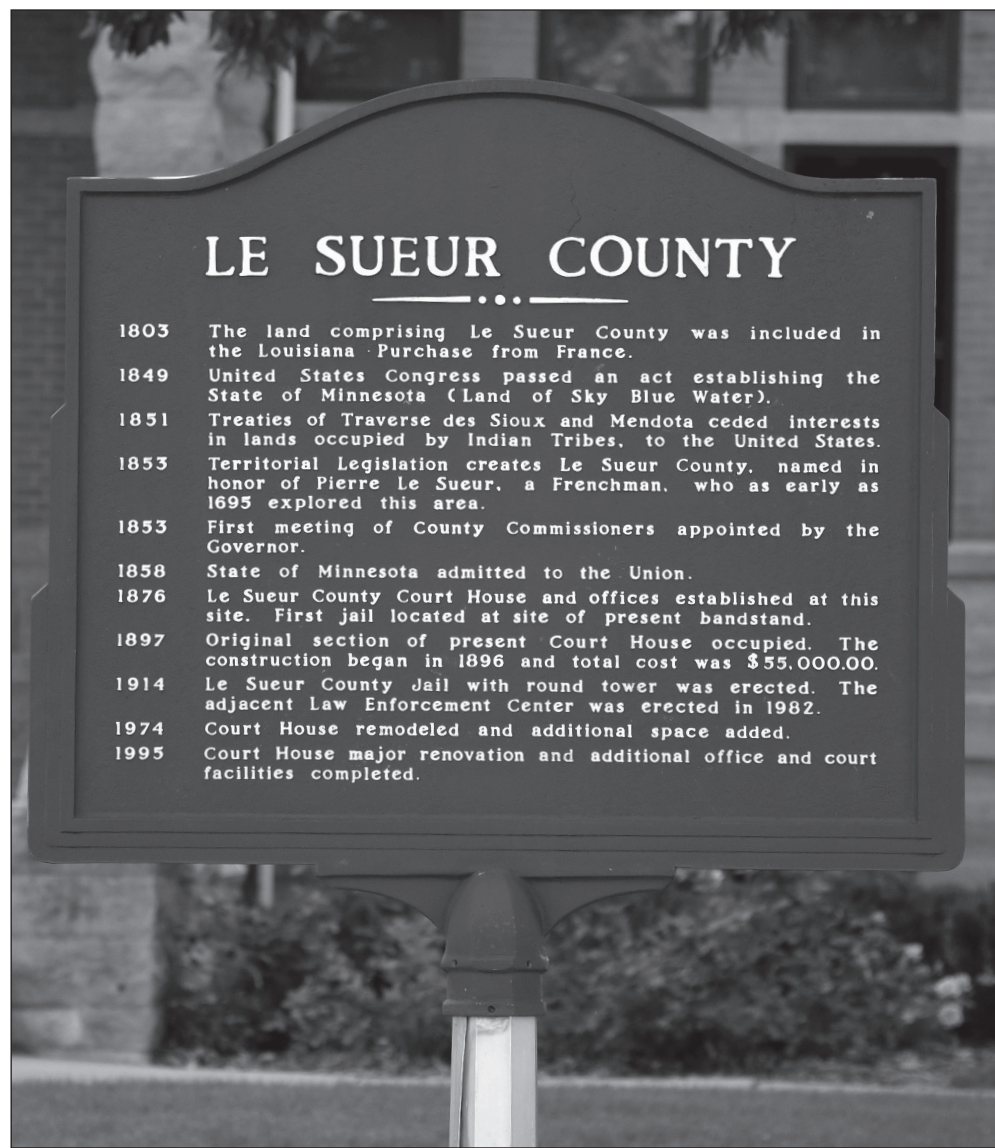
"It's still jail, it's not the Holiday Inn, but the inmates will be able to get a little exercise, which helps the inmates and then the staff. It helps the overall integrity of the jail," Mason said. "It will be better for the staff too."

Existing lack of space can cause safety problems for the staff and inmates.

"The overall lack of space raises concerns for housing persons sentenced to your facility for lengthy periods of time," the letter stated. "It becomes more likely that the facility may experience unruly or uncooperative behavior from inmates that spend an extended period of time in the facility with minimal opportunity for programs or recreation activities."

Le Sueur County is not alone in making big jail investments to keep up with state requirements.

Clay County voters approved a half-cent sales tax in 2016 to pay for a \$52 million jail and law enforcement center in Moorhead, a project that replaces an undersized and deteriorating building that falls short of state stand-



The sign outside of Le Sueur County Government Center shows a history of the building.

ards. Chisago County is building a \$24 million jail and law enforcement building that will be connected to the county's emergency communications center at 15140 Per Road in Center City.

Why a new Justice Center?

- Core building is 105 years old
- Jail and sheriff lack appropriate space. Investigators work in old bedrooms.
- Jail does not comply with Dept. of Corrections (DOC) requirements.
- Lack of security
- DOC could have reduced the facility status from one-year to 90-day facility, which would have resulted in transporting inmates to other areas due to overcrowding. The increased costs could cost taxpayers close to \$500,000 a year.
- Lack of appropriate emergency response storage
- Lack of parking
- Increased courts operations required additional area for programs like drug court.
- Increase in female and mental health inmates impacts space and operations.



Jay Schneider Photos

A new evidence room for large items is one of the many areas that will be used in the new Justice Center.



Security features of the new Justice Center include a screening system that everyone will need to pass through at the entrance before accessing the second floor.



A conference room gives more space to all of the departments that will be housed in the new Le Sueur County Justice Center.



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Jail is larger, safer and more efficient

Lisa Ingebrand
Montgomery Messenger

Sheriff Brett Mason recalls a day when he led an agitated inmate from jail, across the public street, and to the courthouse for an appearance in front of a judge... And, it didn't go well.

On the way into the courthouse, the handcuffed inmate violently kicked open the door (used for both inmates and the public) to the courthouse. The door swung open hard and hit an innocent infant's carseat carrier.

"Fortunately, no one was hurt, but that should never—ever—happen. At no point should an inmate in our cus-

tody come in contact with the public like that," Mason stated. "Having an individual in our custody walk across a public street is also concerning—both for the safety of the public and the person in our custody."

The design of the new Justice Center alleviates these safety and liability issues by combining the jailhouse and the courtroom under one roof.

"The new building keeps inmates separate from the public at all times," Mason stated. "The inmate will be escorted out of the cell and into a non-public elevator to reach the second-floor courtrooms. A holding cell will be

available near the courtroom for an inmate while he or she waits for court."

40 Double-Occupancy Cells

The east side of the new Justice Center houses the jail, which allows for the accommodation of up to 80 inmates (versus the old jail's 35-inmate capacity) in 40 double-occupancy cells and proper classification of inmates.

"We've struggled to classify inmates appropriately for years. The female pod is not supposed to be in ear shot of males. Inmates should also be classified by mental health issues, special needs,



The jail cells at the new Justice Center are double occupancy and feature a small shower, toilet / sink, and a desk.



Photos by Jay Schneider

All jail cells can be monitored from one central command center.

and level of violence. The old facility just didn't have adequate space to do so. We struggled with that a lot," Mason explained.

The old jail building and jail cells also lacked handicap accessibility.

"We've had to get creative to make things work. The new facility will allow us to do our jobs more efficiently and safely," he stated.

Design & Technology Advancements

Beginning with the booking process, officers will have multiple holding cells to utilize at the new facility, versus a single holding cell at the old facility, which made booking multiple individuals involved in an incident a bit tricky.

Once an inmate is booked into the jail, he or she will be housed in one of the jail's 40 double-occupancy cells. Each cell has a toilet, a sink, a bunkbed, and a shower. According to Mason, the addition of a shower in each cell will eliminate inmates from having to shower in a shared dayroom.

The new cells have been constructed in a horseshoe

shape, versus the old jail's linear design, to allow for easier monitoring of the inmates.

Using multiple camera and screen-monitoring systems and computer-controlled cell doors, officers will be able to oversee the entire jail from one, main control desk or "central command."

Mason started organizing a Transition Team in early May to help train all officers regarding the policies in place, the technical systems, and the new processes that will take place in the new jail. This team will continue its work through August to insure a smooth transition.

"I want to make sure my staff is ready to roll," Mason stated. "Currently our average daily population of inmates is between 18 to 25. So why did we build to hold beyond that? Well, we're not only building for now, but building for years to come... We've planned for the future."

Aspects of the new jail that inmates are sure to notice include a larger dayroom area and recreation room. There will also be a classroom, a programming room, and a li-

brary. "It's still jail—not the Holiday Inn. Confinement is punishment. But, times have changed. It has been 40 years since the last jail was built... Providing inmates with a small recreation room builds morale in jail, which in turn, helps my staff," Mason stated.

Visitations

Visitations will look different in the new jail. In recent years, inmates required an official escort to visitations, which would occur face to face, under monitoring. Now, all visits will be via screens.

"New technology allows for an inmate to talk into a screen in the already-monitored visitation room and talk to their visitors who are either in the visiting area, where screens are provided, or at home, using their own iPads for a small fee," Mason explained. "We will also have more conference rooms available where inmates can speak with their attorneys face to face through glass."

Unlike the current jailhouse, the new Justice Center will also have public restrooms.

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Courtroom view

This is a look at one of the two new courtrooms in the new Le Sueur County Justice Center.



The final piece

The very last thing that will be moved from the old jailhouse into the new facility will be the county's emergency dispatch.

"Dispatch is the heart and soul of what we do, and we're doing everything possible to ensure we don't drop even one call when we flip the switch during the move," Sheriff Brett Mason assured. "Dispatch will have a larger space in the new facility. This is something that has been needed for years."

Facility uses new, updated technology

Patrick Fisher
The New Prague Times

Le Sueur County's new Justice Center not only means a new building, but also new and updated technology to serve the staff and the public.

Le Sueur County IT (Information Technology) Director Jeff Neisen listed what was done in the new building.

"A new fiber optic loop was put in connecting the new Justice Center, courthouse, and environmental services building," said Neisen by email. "This fiber optic loop gives the county dual paths to any one of the three buildings." He said this greatly increases the resiliency of the connections to those buildings. The loop allows that if there is one break or cut, intentional or unintentional, there will not be any disruption of service between the buildings. All data, including most phones, are carried over this fiber.

Two new data servers, as well as a new storage array, were installed. These items process and store a large portion of the day to day files such as email. These

new servers upgraded and replaced the existing servers and storage, which dated back to 2012. The older equipment from 2012 is still being used, although it has been put into a reduced roll, and now serves as the first of two backup infrastructures. The old equipment serves as the high availability failover, it will take over if the main equipment fails. In the event of a disconnect or failure of the new equipment, the old equipment can quickly and easily be brought online to seamlessly carry the load of day to day operations with little or no disruption. He said the disconnects or failures could be from various things from natural disasters to equipment or component defects.

A portion of the existing phone system from 2013 was repurposed, upgraded and moved from the existing jail to the new Justice Center. "This now gives the county two endpoints for phone calls," said Neisen. "This reduces the likelihood of phone outages, as calls will automatically route to an available endpoint in the event

one endpoint is down."

"As space has become a premium at the courthouse, conference and meetings rooms have in the past been converted to office space," he said. "The new building has several conference rooms of various sizes available with cutting edge audio and visual technologies to accommodate the ever changing needs of staff and other presenters. These include smart boards, wireless presentation devices, and multiple input and output devices."

New personal computers and monitors were installed for staff. These are being done on a rotational basis, and were already scheduled for 2019. Originally the plan was to install the equipment over winter and early spring. The IT department simply delayed the installation from winter and early spring to mid-summer. This greatly eased the transitional period by allowing setup for both environments, the existing and the new, and a smoother transition with users simply moving to their new work area.

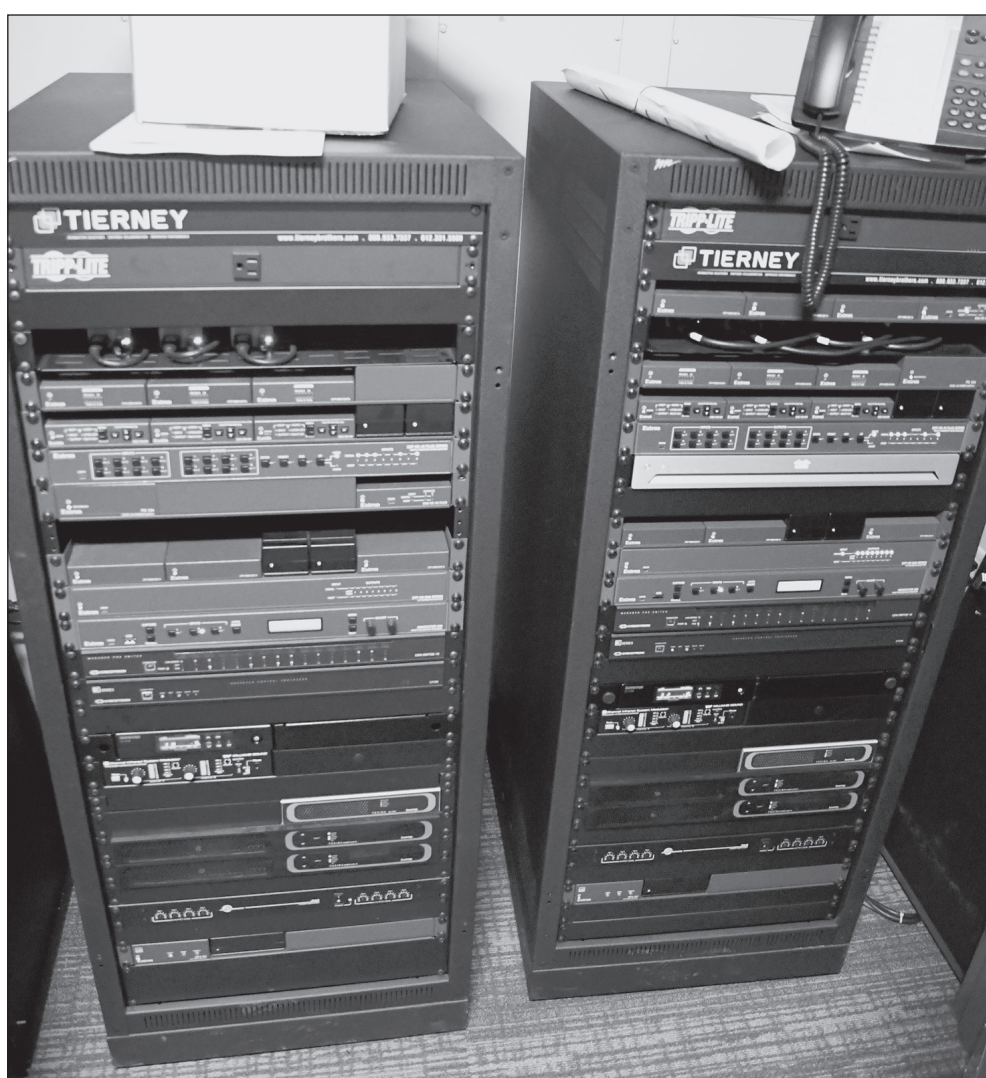


Photo by Jay Schneider

Le Sueur County's new Justice Center has a lot of new and updated technology. This includes upgrades in the phone system, reducing phone outages, smart boards in the conference rooms, new data servers and a new fiber optic loop that connects the new Justice Center, courthouse and Environmental Services Building.

Space opens for other county departments

Chuck Kajer
The New Prague Times

The opening of the Le Sueur County Justice Center not only solves many issues facing the sheriff's office and court system, it also frees up space currently used by those departments for county offices that are becoming increasingly crowded in their

current spaces.

One issue is what to do with the current Le Sueur County Sheriff's office and jail. That building, located just south of the current courthouse, for many years served not only as the jail, but also the residence of the county sheriff.

"It's an unusual building, with many unique features,"

said county administrator Darrel Pettis. He said the county is committed to preserving the building, and will look at what to do with it in the future. No plan has been decided on, but there have been discussions about working with the Le Center Library or with the Le Sueur County Historical Society regarding the building.

The same is true for the second floor of the courthouse, where two courtrooms, judges chambers, court administration and the probation office are currently located. Once those areas are vacated, the county will have that space available for some of its other departments. The space will be remodeled and repurposed, but no determi-

nation has been made as to what will go in there. Those decisions will be made once the areas have been vacated and they have a chance to study the available spaces and what needs to be done for them.

"We have no shortage of departments that have space needs," Pettis said. He noted that two areas are particularly crowded - Human Services and Public Health.

"The need is probably greatest in the Human Services Department - we've added a number of staff over the last few years. Every few years the state has a new policy initiative that requires more staff," he added.

Other areas that could benefit from added space include environmental services, and possibly the human resour-

ces office on the first floor, as well as the county extension service.

Pettis also noted that there are several departments that currently located offsite in rented buildings in Le Center, such as emergency services and felony probation. Those offices will be relocated to the new Justice Center, and the vacated offices may be available to house county services.

Pettis did say that the large antenna next to the old sheriff's office and jail will remain intact. While there was some thought to building a new tower at the site of the new Justice Center, they were able to use fiber optic lines so that the current antenna would continue to serve the county's emergency communications needs.



Jay Schneider Photo

The vacated Le Sueur County Jail and Sheriff's Office building will be renovated and the county is looking for possible future uses for it.

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