

The Pueblo Chieftain

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January 08, 2008

Council orders police building design review

By Peter Roper

The lead architects on Pueblo's planned new police building fought their way through the ice and snow Monday night to attend City Council's workshop meeting and got a scorching reception for their trouble.

When the two-hour meeting was over, council had decided to hire an independent assessment of the work done thus far by Durrant & Associates, of Denver, to determine if the 104,000-square-foot police building being designed is worth the \$242 per-square-foot price the architects are currently quoting.

At the same time, council wanted Durrant & Associates to offer recommendations on how to restore whatever footage they had cut from the project in order to save money - obviously questioning whether the planned building was being downsized in any critical areas in order to hold down the price, which is currently around \$30 million.

"The council is frustrated because every time we meet with you, we find the building is getting smaller but the price keeps going up another \$1 million or so," Councilwoman Barbara Vidmar told Harvey Whitcomb, who is overseeing the project for Durrant's Denver office.

Whitcomb and other Durrant staffers defended their work and said they had only made size reductions with the cooperation of Pueblo police, such as in the evidence storage room, and not to cut costs. Whitcomb said that when council gets its independent assessment - a review that Councilwoman Vera Ortegon called "value engineering" - they would see the Durrant estimates were accurate.

"I'm not saying the \$242 per square foot isn't a little high, but we're not way high," Whitcomb said.

Council wasn't so sure, noting that recent bids on the new Pueblo City-County Health Department building were around \$208 per square foot.

Ortegon estimated the cost of the review would be \$20,000. Other council members said that would be cheap given the total price of the project.

All of the council members appeared to like Ortegon's recommendation that a second opinion be obtained on Durrant's work thus far. Ortegon estimated the engineering review could be accomplished within a few weeks - a proposal that Whitcomb didn't challenge.

Noting that Durrant has finished the "schematic" planning for the building and is about to begin final design work, he said it would be an appropriate time to do the "value engineering" review.

Councilman Mike Occhiato triggered the discussion about restoring any footage to the building that has been trimmed in recent design work. He said Durrant had trimmed off 10,000 square feet and said the city would be foolish to shrink the police building if it truly needed to be larger.

Whitcomb answered that less than 10,000 square feet had been eliminated from the building, and said it was done in consultation with police over what space would really be needed.

The purpose of Monday's discussion was supposed to focus on more than \$1 million in extra add-ons that could be made to the building to make it more environmentally efficient. That discussion didn't last long, however, as council members made it clear they were more unhappy with the total price. As for the environmental features, council said they might add some to the building when they had a firmer understanding of the current cost estimate after the design review.

"We can always add some of the mechanical features, such as (heat-saving) windows and insulation to the building and put our own plaque on the wall," Councilwoman Judy Weaver said. "I can't see spending an extra \$1 million just for better public relations."

Even so, council agreed to City Manager Dave Galli's recommendation that council consider a formal contract at its next meeting for Durrant to finish its work - contingent on the results of the independent review.

"I don't want to put this project any farther behind," Vidmar said.

On other issues, Planning Director Jerry Pacheco asked council for guidance on revising the city's 2005 sign ordinance. Pacheco said there are some simple loopholes to be closed - such as limiting businesses to a single sign or being more specific about where signs taller than 30 feet are allowed in the city.

A tougher question was what to do about the growing number of Light Emitting Diode signs, that can flash changing messages and video-like images. Pacheco said the LED signs are very energy efficient and growing in popularity but can be very distracting to drivers.

A number of council members rejected any suggestion the city put a moratorium on the LED signs while it works on the issue.

"Putting a moratorium on a business' sign is a lot like putting them out of business," said Vidmar. "I'm not in favor of any moratorium. If this problem is moving like lightning, then we need to move like lightning too."

Councilman Ray Aguilar quipped, "What you're telling us is it's hard to talk on your cell phone, read the signs and drive at the same time."

Council directed Pacheco to draft language to change the sign ordinance on the simpler issues and to meet with interested individuals on the LED sign question, such as sign company representatives and others, to talk about how to regulate them. In particular, council was concerned about the signs being used for off-site advertising or even political messages, and whether the bright lights affect residential areas.