

The Pueblo Chieftain

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City breaks ground on new cop shop

By Jeff Tucker

Pueblo City Councilwoman Vera Ortegon got her hands dirty Wednesday during what wasn't so much a groundbreaking ceremony as it was a wall-breaking ceremony.

After thanking a gathering of a few dozen city employees for braving the frigid temperatures and a few words from her colleagues on City Council, Ortegon hopped behind the controls of a construction excavator and, after a brief lesson and a wild swing toward the gathering, smashed the machine's scoop into a building at the corner of C and Main streets.

The celebration kicked off the demolition of three buildings on the block south of Main between C and D streets and is the first step toward actual construction of the city's new Police and Municipal Court building.

"Today is a momentous occasion not only for the police department but for the city and the voters," Ortegon said.

She said the demolition of the building constitutes a dream come true for the city and will be an important part of the renewed energy in the neighborhood brought by the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo and other projects in the area.

"We're getting rid of an ugly building to make way for a new, beautiful building," she said. City Councilman Ray Aguilera also said Wednesday was a good day, but added that he believes the city must commit to staffing the building once it's open.

"We build so few public buildings in Pueblo that it's very important that this building have architectural integrity," Aguilera said. "But it's just as important that we hire more police to keep Pueblo a safe and healthy place."

Aguilera said he would like to see between eight and 10 more police officers in Pueblo.

Police Chief Jim Billings and Municipal Judge William Alexander also thanked voters and the community for supporting the project.

Billings noted that the current police building is 50 years old and that the work to get a new headquarters was started by administrations before his.

Alexander noted that the municipal court has had many homes, most recently in the Southeastern Colorado Heritage Museum on B Street, and the court is looking forward to another move in a few years.

Once construction begins, it would take between 16 and 20 months to complete.

City Manager David Galli and Councilman Larry Atencio also thanked the public for its patience.

"I think a lot of people are going to say it's about time," Atencio said. "But we're just at the beginning of this historic ordeal; well, not an ordeal but a process."

The process started in 2004 when city voters allowed the city to keep excess property tax revenues from Xcel Energy's expansion of the Comanche power plant to pay for the building.

Since then, the city hired Durrant Architects to design the building but council had become increasingly frustrated with the escalating cost of the project.

On Tuesday, council heard a report from a second firm hired to do a peer review of Durrant's work and seemed satisfied with the results and willing to move forward with the design of the building.