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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES

Police headquarters destined for replacement on South Main Street.

Calling all cars: Be on lookout for police building

City expects to finalize a design by March at the latest.

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The longest police stakeout in Pueblo history appears ready to pay off.

Pueblo City Council now says construction of a new police building should begin by August with the opening to follow about 16 months later in December 2009.

Pueblo police, hunting for a new home since a 1996 needs study showed their current building was about three times too small and a generation too antiquated, will want to mark December 2009 on the calendar. At least in pencil.

Looking back, the entire community might have been hauled away if ever forced to take a roadside sobriety test on its handling of the project. Initially, voters rejected the project - twice. Then delays followed as the city sought to shore up funding, acquire the necessary property, settle upon a design and, all the while, address the needs of private employers showing sudden interest in Downtown.

Nearly four years will pass between the 2004 vote and the start of construction. A full five years will pass between the vote and when the building will open.

The community's defense: Not insanity - although a judge might agree - but rather that such a roundabout path was pretty much unavoidable. On this one, seemingly everyone in town felt the need to take a turn at the wheel.

Besides, the community can note that it's already paying for its indecision. Not even a year after voters approved of the project, Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005 and sent construction prices soaring. A building promoted as costing \$15-\$20 million will now cost \$25-\$30 million.

The city's consulting architect, Jim Gardner, estimates building costs now average about \$210 per square foot, up 56 percent from \$135 per square foot before Hurricane Katrina. The price of concrete has doubled, he said. Brick costs have risen 60 percent.

A kinder take on the saga - and one that city leaders would say is more accurate - would harken back to the old parable of the tortoise and the hare: By moving slowly but smartly, the city will come out ahead in the end.

A review: 1996 through 2004:

Voters first rejected the project in 1997 as part of a proposed quarter-cent increase in the sales tax to fund infrastructure upgrades. The measure was thrashed; 86 percent of voters said 'no.' A second election in 2003 also ended in defeat. The proposal called for tapping into the half-cent sales tax for job creation. It lost by a 2-1 margin.

November 2004:

Finally, voters in 2004 approved of the project. The new plan called for using the anticipated tax windfall if Xcel Energy went ahead with plans to expand its Comanche power plant and annex the plant into the city. The city estimated the windfall could approach \$17 million, and the ballot question also committed part of any windfall to a new municipal court and two new fire stations.

November 2004 through July 2005:

Negotiations on the Xcel expansion intensify.

Environmental groups, labor groups, the Pueblo Board of Water Works, the state Public Utilities Commission and Rocky Mountain Steel Mills (the owner of land needed to complete the "flagpole" annexation) all took turns helping shape the terms. The deal wasn't finalized until July 2005. On property taxes, Xcel agreed to pay an upfront sum of \$13 million.

July 2005 through July 2006:

City Council spent several months taking public input on building sites. The choice was made easier when the No. 2 option - private land across from the Convention Center - sold in November 2005 to a developer of a Cambria Suites hotel. Council happily deferred to the hotel developer.

Talks took place with Pueblo County on possibly co-locating a proposed new City-County Health Department at the spacious Main and D site. The talks lasted a year but ultimately went nowhere. The county in July 2006 announced plans to use county-owned land at Ninth and Santa Fe.

Meanwhile, other space at Main and D was talked about as a possible site for a new city administration office building, if one was ever funded. The idea led the city to order up a master plan for how best to use the Main and D site for the police building and any other future city needs.

Into all of that mix fell AT&T.

In April 2006, the city inked a deal for AT&T to build a 600-worker call center along the Riverwalk near the Main and D site, a major jobs boon but also one that complicated all of the planning for the area, including the police building. The deal included a city promise to build a large parking garage.

July 2006 through November 2006:

The city would spend the rest of 2006 scrambling for ways to finance the Riverwalk parking garage, ultimately securing federal tax credits that saved \$2.5 million. At the same time, the city began an early study of how best to fit the parking garage and the police building onto the Main and D site.

The city also awaited the outcome of a November 2006 vote on a county tax question that included funding for the new health department building. Voters approved. The city lost a potential partner for its municipal campus but also gained the freedom of being able to make more decisions on its own.

November 2006 through today:

Planning on the police building hit a higher gear. A master plan of the Main and D site was ordered and completed. The plan identified space for the police station and also a future administrative office, although City Council agreed to table the office project indefinitely. Architects also went to work on the design of the police building, to include a municipal court as voters had directed.

Meanwhile, the city began the final push to buy out the remaining private property needed at the Main and D site. One small business, Santangelo Woodworks at 120 South Main St., proved arguably the toughest sell in an era when the public appetite for condemning private property was limited.

It wasn't until April 2007 that the city inked a deal to buy out Santangelo's, a small shop but in a critical location: Smack dab in the heart of land sought for the parking garage and the police station. The city eventually agreed to pay the owner \$250,000 and relocation costs.

Today:

The city expects to finalize a design by March at the latest, complete the technical construction documents by June and then put the project out to bid. Bid openings will take place by mid-July with construction to start in August. The timetable could move up slightly depending on how quickly the design phases are completed, city planners say.

Meanwhile, City Council members are out in the community performing damage control on the project's price tag. While the project was never going to cost as little as \$13 million (the actual upfront tax windfall negotiated from Xcel) or even \$17 million (the estimate cited in the 2004 vote), council members acknowledge the two numbers stuck with the public - and the city should have done more clarify them over the years.

In fact, the \$30 million is still only an estimate. The final price of the police building will not become known until the bid openings this summer. It is yet another uncertainty in a project that's weaved all over the road.

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