

New County Jail/Law Enforcement Center Taking Shape

By Sarah Wetzel for the Plain Talk June 21, 2024

Vermillion
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Clay County Sheriff Andy Howe and Vermillion Police Chief Crystal Brady gave a presentation to the Vermillion Rotary Club a few weeks ago about the new Clay County Jail/Law Enforcement Center that's currently being constructed just to the west of Polaris in town.

The \$42.8 million bond was approved by Clay County voters back in 2022 and the groundbreaking took place on Oct. 3 of last year.

The projected completion of the project is in November.

“Crystal came on as police chief right in time to help us get this bond passed so she's been instrumental in getting that done,” Howe said. “Then we have redesigned and redesigned this building for one to fit the site and also just to fit the needs and the changes due to budget to fit within the bond amount.”

Work on the footings began immediately following the groundbreaking.

“Construction has been interesting and we've been learning a lot as we go, but they started work right away and that was scraping off the soil that's there, bringing in new soil and compacting it, then they let it set for a while,” Howe said. “As soon as they got the dirt to where it was suitable for construction they went around this perimeter and they bored holes and they call it a Ram Aggregate or Geopier foundation.

“They bored holes, filled them with gravel and pounded it good and solid and then they poured the footings on top of that so it should hold even though you're on this glacial soil that's not stable enough for construction,” he said.



Contractors building the new Clay County Jail and Law Enforcement Center that will house the Vermillion Police Department and the Clay County Sheriff's Department are making progress despite some setbacks because of weather earlier this spring. David Lias/Vermillion Plain Talk

According to Howe, the city is putting a new street called James Street that will come off Stanford, wrap around the new building and tie into James Street again.

He said construction has been heavily reliant on the weather. Heavy slowdowns were experienced in April because of wet conditions. Quick work occurred other weeks.

Though water and mud have created obstacles for the workers and construction machinery, Howe said drainage issues won't be an issue once the project is completed due to the moat, pond and sewer system that are not yet in place.

In the meantime, there are lots of steel structures taking place.

“They think that we'll have the roof on and the walls up in July if we get some cooperating weather,” Howe said.

He said the lengthy design process involved crunching square footage and working to achieve the most economical design.

A full visual of the building's design will not be shared publicly due to security reasons.

"The design includes a shared space for activities that law enforcement collaborates on," Howe said. "That's going to be our evidence handling and we're trying to get just as modern as we can with that. Through lockers we control our chain of custody for all our evidence items and get them into secure storage where access is very restricted."

Brady appreciates the improvements.

"What's nice about this building is we get to share everything, so all of our interview rooms are together," Brady said. "If we bring somebody in, they don't have to sit by our hallway where anybody can kind of hear what's going on and now they're a little bit further into the building and it's more private."

Also included are training rooms, which will be a positive change since Howe said they currently rely heavily on the University of South Dakota and the Vermillion Fire Department for training space.

One of the training rooms is also designed to be the Emergency Operations Center when needed.

"It's right across the hall from Emergency Management who now is crammed into a closet basically, a very small room with so much stuff we don't even know if he's in there," Howe said. "He's going to have a lot more space."

A room right of the lobby will be available to take statements.

"Sometimes somebody comes in and they're hanging out in the hallway, we don't even know what they really want and they say, 'can I talk to you somewhere?'," Howe said. "We don't even know what they're up to, what their question is so now we'll have a room we can take them in off the lobby and take a statement from them, initially start a report and probably handle 99% of what they came in the office for right from that without bringing them deep into the building."

Howe said this avoids any suspects passing victims in the hallway or vice versa.

Another improvement is there will be two entrances, one for the jail and one for the rest of the building whereas currently there is a shared lobby.

"We separated it out and have a jail lobby because a lot of the comings and goings of the jail involve people bonding somebody out from jail, also somebody turning themselves in on warrants, people coming in to blow in the 24/7 program, get their scam bracelets downloaded and things like that," Howe said. "They don't want to come into the lobby and share that space with the general public and often the general public doesn't want to share the space with them."

In the main lobby there will be one window for the police department and one for the sheriff's department.

"Right now, you can come in and you can talk to Sarah who is the sheriff's administrative assistant and Deb who's our office manager and you would do the same thing here," Brady said. "You would go up to their window during the day, during office hours during the week and talk to them and then we have a phone option to pick up and talk to a dispatcher if you were to walk into the lobby after hours or during the weekend."

Howe described the new drive-through garage as opposed to the drive in and back out garage they have now. Intake will take place in this area.

"The doors will all be run by jail staff instead of right now we have perimeter doors run by dispatch and interior doors run by jailers with keys," Howe said. "All the doors, perimeter and interior will be run by master control which will be in the jail area."

Also in the new building is a kitchen, missing in the current one.

"We actually oversized the kitchen somewhat," Howe said. "I'm confident that this jail will serve Clay County for 50 plus years. If the day ever comes we have a design for an addition, to make that work we had to make sure the kitchen would serve it. So, the kitchen will serve a jail larger than what we have right now."

Howe and Brady confirmed they will continue taking prisoners from other counties and be able to serve those counties as well as possibly the federal government.

"Right now, we take all incoming inmates from Turner County and then we'll hold them up to three days and then they move on, so I expect to

see more of that and my understanding is eastern South Dakota is starved for beds so it's kind of if you build it, you've got space, they'll come," Howe said.

There is room for agency growth as well.

"We have an additional investigator's office we can use for other things until we were to have another investigator, but we left room for more office space so that we can grow within our agency, too," Brady said. "We have 20 sworn police officer positions. We're still hiring a few more right now but that's how big our department is right now."

Howe reported eight deputies plus him in the sheriff's department plus 10 jail staff.

Howe and Brady also described unique spaces that will allow the police department and sheriff's office each to do their business and a large fleet garage to accommodate emergency management's equipment along with everything else.

The jail itself will have a 54-bed capacity.

According to Howe, originally the design included 44 but even after reducing the square footage to save money they were able to increase the number of beds.

"We were able to get a lot more economical," he said. "We went with a couple of the housing opportunities as dormitory type and instead of cells with two people and a toilet it's eight people and a toilet and because they've just got a large room with eight bunks in it and for many of our inmates that works pretty well. They're not looking for trouble while they're in there and if they don't behave well, they get to move to the other side."

Howe said there will be eight different housing opportunities with the ability to classify people properly as sentence versus pretrial, male versus female, transgender if that becomes an issue and other various reasons they'd have to separate people.

"We can actually change the purpose of each pod if necessary, so if we find ourselves 75% female, we can have 75% of those pods serving female or it can adjust," Howe said.

The whole building is designed for flexibility, growth and the future as well as the surrounding lots.

Currently there is a trailer park on the south side and other lots near it are designed for multi housing, single family housing, a few commercial lots as well as a park.