

MILWAUKEE COUNTY
Inter-Office Communication

Date: July 1, 2026

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services

Subject: A report from the Department of Administrative Services and Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance, providing an update on the Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex project

File Type: Informational Report

REQUEST

This informational report from the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) and the Office of Strategy, Budget and Performance (SBP) provides an update on the Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex project, which includes planning for the replacement of the Public Safety Building.

POLICY

This report follows information presented to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors in prior years through files [17-592](#), [17-535](#), [16-673](#), [18-427](#), [18-430](#), [24-738](#), [24-44](#), [25-411](#), [25-582](#), [25-737](#), [26-315](#), [26-425](#), [26-445](#), [26-490](#), and [26-494](#).

BACKGROUND

The existing Courthouse Complex facilities are severely outdated and, in some cases, functionally obsolete, presenting significant public safety and security issues. In fact, the Public Safety Building was built nearly 100 years ago and does not meet modern needs for supporting the safety of the region, the health of the community, nor the rehabilitation of neighbors.

In 2014, the State of Wisconsin First Judicial District, the Milwaukee County Board Committee on Transportation, Public Works and Transit, the Milwaukee County Executive, and the Milwaukee County Consolidated Facilities Planning Steering Committee identified a need to develop a Strategic Facilities Master Plan to better support the Milwaukee County Circuit Courts and their operations contained within the Historic Courthouse, Criminal Justice Facility, Public Safety Building, and Vel R. Phillips Juvenile Justice Center. This need was generated from widespread concern regarding the safety, security, and deferred maintenance associated with these facilities. It is widely recognized that a status quo solution for the delivery of County services out of these facilities is not a viable long-term option.

Due to the project's complexity, planning and construction was divided into five phases which vary in duration depending on the workload and funding levels available to support the effort. The mission of the five phases as originally defined:

- Phase I. (Previous Phase) Identify a consolidated, redesigned space for the people working in and served by the County Courts and identify the highest and best use of the County Courthouse.
- Phase II. (Previous Phase) Define a consolidated, redesigned space for the people working in the areas of non-court functions within the County Courthouse and Public Safety Building and establish existing conditions and identify opportunities for increased efficiencies.
- Phase III. (Previous Phase) Determine ultimate space locations for all Departments associated with Phases I and II; complete space programming, designing, and build outs for swing space required for completion of Phases IV and V; determine preferred ownership, financing, and delivery methods for interim and ultimate solutions.
- Phase IV. (Current phase) Complete planning, programming, and design of a new Criminal Courthouse facility and other required facility improvements – including by incorporating community input. Complete master plans.
- Phase V. (Future phase) Construct new facilities, complete other required facility improvements, and relocate Departments to ultimate locations.

I. Current State of the Public Safety Building

Created to Support Mandated Judicial and Public Safety Services

Built in 1929 by and for the City and County, the 322,000 square foot Public Safety Building is currently home to the Milwaukee County criminal courts, County Sheriff and District Attorney's offices, and other related uses.

Milwaukee County hosts the State's largest Judicial District and is comprised of 47 Trial Courts & 23 Court Commissioners. The First Judicial District of the Wisconsin State Court System is comprised of 8 Children's, 11 Civil, 5 Family, and 22 Criminal Courts. In 2025, 107,533 cases came into Milwaukee County. This represents 14.4% of all cases in the state (more than Dane, Waukesha and Brown Counties combined).

Public Safety Building Risks

The building is severely outdated, functionally obsolete, has significant public safety and security issues, and does not reflect the quality of service for which the County is responsible. The issues can be organized in the following categories:

- **Poor Building Flow Impacts Court Outcomes:**
 - Mistrials occur due to interactions in common hallways.
 - Transportation of defendants and juries cause delays.
 - Slow justice leads to backlogs.
 - No secure path to transport defendants.
- **Functionally Obsolete:**
 - Many spaces not ADA compliant.
 - 60,000 square feet of former jail space and other areas obsolete.
 - Potential air quality issues due to limited distribution.
- **Failing Infrastructure:**
 - Crumbling façade, plumbing leaks, broken windows, electrical system is beyond useful life.
 - Historically, \$500,000 has been reserved annually for emergency repairs.
- **Unsafe by State Standards:** does not comply with Supreme Court Rule #68 (Structure and Design of Courthouses). The current facility impedes justice and risks safety.

Challenges & Recommendations

The Public Safety Building has over \$75 million in deferred system replacements, not including code and safety issues. Upgrading the building to current code would cost an estimated \$150 million (as of 2017), which still would not address inefficient and unsafe layout of the facility. Based on inflationary factors considered as of 2024, deferred maintenance and code compliance upgrades could cost more than an estimated \$334 million without resolving unusable, obsolete building space issues nor addressing safety issues related to undersized courtrooms and the lack of secure pathways to transport in custody residents.

The 2017 Milwaukee County Courthouse Advisory Group recommended replacing the facility and considering the functionality of the other buildings in the Courthouse Complex. Work to advance that recommendation has continued to present day.

II. Project Progress

This report provides an update on Milwaukee County's Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex (IJCC) project which was reinvigorated in 2024. The Department of Administrative Services (DAS) provides executive sponsorship for the project within the County Executive's administration, while the Advisory Council acts as the recommending body and is led by the Chief Judge.

Four work groups have been established to advance key project activities, with centralized support and coordination by the Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance Project Management Office (PMO). While the work groups focus on specific areas of the project, the PMO ensures alignment and integration of efforts to achieve project objectives.

Conceptual Design & Cost Estimate

The project team with the advisory council established the IJCC mission, vision, goals and decision principles in 2024. With this foundation, the IJCC project moved forward with Conceptual Design in 2025.

Conceptual Design and Master Planning are nearing completion within the second quarter of 2026. In the June Board cycle, preliminary 100% conceptual design images were shared ([File 26-494](#)). With this progress, the design team put forth a cost estimate based on the 75% conceptual design that includes critical as well as supplemental components to completing the project.



Table A: 75% Conceptual Cost Estimate

IJCC Projected Project Cost Total	\$ 896,578,000
New Criminal Courthouse Building	\$ 712,532,000
Enabling Phase Investments	\$ 88,052,000
Existing Safety Building Demolition	\$ 17,430,000
Skybridge	\$ 14,515,000
Criminal Justice Facility Updates	\$ 1,274,000
Historic Courthouse East Entry Addition	\$ 45,775,000
Central Utility Plant	\$ 17,000,000

Objectively, the IJCC project represents the largest capital project ever undertaken by Milwaukee County. Key building features include:

- Approximately 452,000 GSF (gross square footage)
- 11 floors including 1 basement/garage, 1 mechanical penthouse
- 20 Standard Criminal Courts, 1 Ceremonial Court, 1 Traffic Court, and 4 Problem Solving Courts
- Connection to Criminal Justice Facility and Historic Courthouse by a new skybridge
- Public Atrium
- Single-loaded court floors with views to MacArthur Square & Historic Courthouse

- Pedestrian access to MacArthur Square
- Problem Solving Court floor with supporting services & green roof features
- Grab N' Go Food Services
- Underground Secure Parking (58) with Sally Port
- Accommodations for Central Utility Plant to serve entire Courthouse Complex

Justice & Equity Values

The IJCC project is intentionally designed to improve justice system outcomes, not solely to construct a new facility. With leadership from the Community Justice Council (CJC), the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) led a collaborative values-setting process in 2025. This included a working session with justice system leaders, a public survey and outreach to system-involved stakeholders, a series of focus groups, and one-on-one interviews.

The core values identified through NCSC's engagement with system leaders translated into tangible design and operational decisions as outlined in Table B. A dedicated problem-solving courts floor is a central component of this strategy, supporting participant dignity, collaboration across justice partners, accountability, access to treatment and services, and flexibility for evolving court models.

Table B: IJCC Justice Policy and Programs: Values Setting

Value	How This Value Is Built into the Project
Safety and Security	▪ Three-way separation for public, staff, and in custody throughout the new building ▪ One entrance into the building for the public with security screening
Accessibility and Efficiency	▪ New signage and digital displays for improved wayfinding ▪ Use technology and virtual resources to improve court access
Collaboration	▪ Social hubs and meeting spaces planned for in the new facility and the historic courthouse
Trust	▪ Offering multiple avenues for community updates and feedback, including surveys, tours, presentations, roadshows, website, and a shared inbox
Community	▪ Create private areas for system-impacted families and individuals, including respite rooms and attorney-client meeting spaces
Transparency	▪ Utilizing a three-pronged decision-making framework for IJCC project decisions, balancing stakeholder feedback, fiscal feasibility, and best practices
Innovation	▪ Allocate space for problem-solving courts

The CJC is serving as a key partner in defining program goals, informing operational and service delivery needs, and convening stakeholders to inform a long-term strategy for problem-solving courts in Milwaukee County.

III. Fiscal Impacts

Response to County Board Budget Amendment Request

The 2026 Adopted Budget directed the Office of Strategy, Budget and Performance, in collaboration with the Office of the Comptroller and other departments, to provide policymakers with a comprehensive assessment of the fiscal impacts associated with the IJCC project. Specifically, the Board requested information regarding debt service, property tax levy implications, the County's self-imposed bonding policy, impacts on service capacity, and the potential effects on deferred maintenance and other capital priorities.

Given the breadth of the request, the County prepared a coordinated series of informational reports, each addressing a specific component of the Board's inquiry.

The Office of the Comptroller's Capital Finance Division report ([File 26-445](#)) provided an analysis of the project's anticipated debt service, projected impacts on the property tax levy, outstanding general obligation debt, and considerations related to the County's bonding policies and financing capacity. The report also presents preliminary debt service scenarios to help policymakers understand the long-term fiscal implications of various bonding levels.

The Department of Administrative Services – Facilities Management Division report ([File 26-490](#)) examines the relationship between the IJCC project and Milwaukee County's broader capital portfolio. It evaluates the cost of in-action and how various funding approaches could affect deferred maintenance, facility conditions, operational service delivery, and the County's ability to continue addressing capital renewal needs across parks, senior centers, public safety facilities, and other tax-levy-supported assets. The report also evaluates project delivery capacity and concludes that the County can advance the IJCC project while continuing a normal capital program, avoiding a "capital holiday" that would increase long-term facility risks and costs.

This July cycle informational report complements those analyses by presenting the updated conceptual project cost estimate, comparing the estimated cost of replacement with the projected cost of maintaining the existing Public Safety Building, and summarizing the fiscal and operational consequences of delaying or not proceeding with the project.

The Office of Strategy, Budget and Performance will also present a companion report outlining potential funding scenarios for the remaining project costs. That report evaluates alternative financing approaches, including various combinations of County bonding and anticipated State funding, to support future policy discussions regarding project implementation. Together, these reports provide policymakers with a comprehensive understanding of the project's financial impacts, operational considerations, and long-term infrastructure implications.

Cost of Inaction

Failure to secure funding for the replacement of the Public Safety Building does not eliminate the need for significant capital investment. Rather, it commits Milwaukee County to continued investment in an aging facility that no longer meets modern operational, safety, accessibility, or judicial standards.

After 99 years, the Public Safety Building has exceeded its useful life and requires substantial ongoing investment to remain operational. Current estimates indicate that addressing deferred maintenance, replacing major building systems, and bringing the facility into compliance with applicable building codes would require more than \$334 million (figure estimated based on 2024 inflationary factors). These investments would preserve some of the existing structure but would not resolve the building's fundamental operational deficiencies, including inadequate security circulation, obsolete and unusable space (60,000 square feet), inefficient courtroom operations, ADA accessibility, or noncompliance with modern courthouse design standards (Supreme Court Standards).

Continued occupancy of the existing facility also exposes Milwaukee County to increasing operational and financial risk. The County currently budgets approximately \$500,000 annually for emergency repairs to address failures in aging building systems, including roofing, plumbing, electrical infrastructure, windows, and mechanical equipment. As these systems continue to deteriorate, the likelihood of unplanned failures, service disruptions, and costly emergency repairs will increase. Emergency and other necessary repairs are completed as temporary or low-cost solutions, as plans to replace the entire facility progress.

The existing building also impacts the effective administration of justice. The facility's layout requires the movement of defendants, jurors, judges, staff, attorneys, victims, and the public through shared circulation areas, creating security concerns, operational inefficiencies, and the potential for court delays or mistrials.

Additionally, delaying implementation of the replacement project is expected to increase overall project costs due to construction inflation and market escalation. Current estimates indicate that each month of delay from the proposed timeline may increase project costs by approximately \$3 million to \$4 million, while continued investments in the existing building provide only temporary improvements without addressing the underlying deficiencies. Not advancing the project would lead to increased costs to complete the project at a later date and likely require major investment in the existing building to continue sustaining operations.

For these reasons, the cost of inaction is not limited to deferred construction. It includes continued expenditures to maintain an obsolete facility, increasing operational and safety risks, escalating project costs, and the ongoing impact of an outdated courthouse on the administration of justice. Replacement of the Public Safety Building represents the most fiscally responsible long-term strategy to reduce lifecycle costs, improve operational

efficiency, and provide a safe, modern courthouse capable of serving Milwaukee County for decades to come.

Project Funding

The life-to-date project budget totals \$38.6 million under Project WC0276011. Available funds support contracts for construction management, cost validation, and technical consulting services.

Milwaukee County successfully advanced funding for IJCC through the 2025–27 State Biennial Budget. As part of a legislative compromise, the State provided direct funding for Expressway Policing Aids (EPA), allowing the County to redirect equivalent local resources toward the IJCC project (\$18 million in Year 1 and \$20 million in Year 2 in state support), which is now part of the state’s base budget. In 2026, Milwaukee County allocated \$15.8 million in freed-up tax levy to IJCC as a result of State EPA funding. That redirection could help reduce the impact on local taxpayers over the life of the construction period and bond duration.

The project will be considered through Milwaukee County's established Capital Improvement Committee process in 2026, requesting capital funding for relocation, demolition, and construction expenses. Through this request, DAS will request allocation of tax levy funds (\$15.8 million) in 2027 as freed-up by State EPA in addition to bond authorization for the remaining projected project costs.

If County policymakers continue to apply freed-up tax levy from EPA to IJCC annually from 2027-2032 (design and construction period), that could offset project costs by approximately \$94.8 million. This offset impacts the amount of principal and interest in the future, related to bonding.

As a complimentary strategy, continuing to apply this same amount over the projected 20-year bond to pay down debt service would reduce the cost to taxpayers by \$316.4 million. The following report by SBP delves further into the principal and interest components of the bonding options available to Milwaukee County.

Table C: Potential Tax Levy EPA Impacts

IJCC Projected Project Cost Total	\$ 896,578,000
Authorized Funds To-Date	\$ (38,630,000)
Continued State EPA Funding (2027-2032)	\$ (94,800,000)
Remaining Project Amount (Potentially Bonded)	\$ 763,148,000
Continued State EPA Funding to help pay debt service (20 years)	\$ (316,400,000)

Potential Impacts to Project Scope & Cost

The IJCC project team recognizes that this investment extends beyond a single building. The IJCC project serves as the first phase of a broader long-term master plan for the Courthouse Complex that maximizes the use of existing County assets while strategically modernizing facilities over time. In addition to the conceptual design and master plan, the project creates a comprehensive approach to stewarding public assets rather than addressing facility needs in isolation. There are other inclusions to IJCC that Milwaukee County could consider as well.

- A. **Planned Capital Projects.** Concurrently with IJCC progress, a number of capital projects within the Historic Courthouse and Criminal Justice Facility have been evaluated by the County Capital Planning and IJCC project teams. Many of these projects support the future operation of the courthouse complex and would otherwise be brought to the County Board as separate capital requests over the coming years.

Incorporating related Historic Courthouse and Criminal Justice Facility projects into the IJCC program could improve project delivery, reduce operational disruptions, and create cost and operational efficiencies through coordinated design, procurement, construction management, and sequencing. It would also provide the County Board with a more complete understanding of the total investment needed to modernize the Courthouse Complex, allowing interdependent projects to be considered as part of a single, long-term capital strategy rather than through multiple future appropriations. There are nearly 30 projects that would fit these criteria, totaling an estimated \$50 million.

- B. **Conceptual Design Alternatives.** The conceptual design also identifies several optional project alternates that are not included in the current base scope. These alternatives represent policy choices that could expand or modify the project to enhance sustainability, operational efficiency, security, and user experience. While some alternatives would increase the overall project budget and others would generate cost savings, many will require separate consideration as the project moves into future design and funding decisions. This approach provides flexibility for the County Board to align the final project scope with available resources and long-term strategic priorities. Currently these include:

Alt #1	District Attorney Floor Height	\$ 3,363,621
Alt #2	Add Walking Bridge to Public Administration Building	\$ 2,271,827
Alt #3	Add Equipment and Piping for CUP*	\$17,099,435
Alt #4	Replace Natural Gas Heating Systems with Electric	\$11,067,341
Alt #5	Inclusion of Circadian Lighting Scheme	\$ 5,258,798
Alt #6	Problem Solving Floor Floorplan Change	\$ - 871,431

Alt #7	Remove Sheriff-only Elevator from Parking Garage	\$- 1,511,427
Alt #8	Add Roof Mounted Solar Panels	\$ 2,772,640
Alt #9	Add Curtainwall Glass Spandrel Solar Panels	\$ 4,058,644
Alt #10	Add Solar Panels to South Elevation Shade System	\$ 2,638,101
Alt #11	Composite Curtainwall ILO Honeycomb Stone Cladding	\$ 5,651,542

* The Central Utility Plant (CUP) is included in the base cost estimate currently.

IV. Design & Construction Updates

Public buildings of this scale are investments measured in generations. The IJCC project has envisioned infrastructure that will support the administration of justice for the next century. It is the product of years of planning, stakeholder engagement, operational analysis, and conceptual design refinement.

Design & Construction Timeline

Throughout the planning process, Milwaukee County has worked collaboratively with judges, justice system partners, County departments, design professionals, community members, and policymakers to ensure the project reflects both current operational needs and the flexibility to respond to future changes in the justice system. The result is a concept that has been intentionally designed to improve safety and security, enhance operational efficiency, promote accessibility and inclusivity, support restorative justice practices, and remain adaptable as technology, court operations, and community needs continue to evolve.

Phase IV of this work spans multiple years as outlined below.

Table D: Estimated Project Timeline

Phase	Initiation	Closing
Intake and Planning	Q2 2024	Q4 2025
Design Phase	Q4 2024	Q4 2028
Justice Policy & Program Action Planning	Q3 2024	Sustained in CJC
Process Improvement	Q4 2024	Q3 2027
Pre-Construction	Q4 2024	Q2 2028
Enabling Phase Relocation	Q2 2027	Q2 2028
Safety Building Demolition	Q2 2028	Q1 2029
New Courthouse Construction	Q2 2028	Q2 2032
Historic Courthouse Renovation	Q4 2026	Q1 2033

Schematic Design

The project is now moving into Schematic Design (June 2026–April 2027), followed by Design Development (April 2027–January 2028). Conceptual design is incorporating final adjustments from feedback and solutioning with the Clerk of Courts, District Attorney’s Office, Justice Point, and Chief Judge’s administrative staff.

Schematic Design will further develop the architectural, structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, technology, and security systems while refining courtroom layouts, operational workflows, and connections across the Courthouse Complex. Stakeholders will continue to validate building operations and user needs, design alternates will be evaluated, and the project cost estimate and implementation schedule will be further refined. Completion of schematic design will provide Milwaukee County with a substantially higher level of design certainty and cost confidence prior to advancing into detailed design and construction documentation. Regular updates will be provided as each phase progresses.

Climate and Sustainability Considerations

The recently delivered 100% conceptual design was fully informed by Milwaukee County’s Sustainable Design Standards, helping to shape sustainable decision-making. The Office of Sustainability has served an active role in the design workgroup, helping to advise on design feedback that can deliver on environmental and fiscal sustainability in addition to best practices and public approval.

The 100% concept includes an up-to-date Tier 1 scorecard (Appendix A) reporting that the IJCC project design currently meets all 20 of the ‘Better’ compliance requirements. Required strategies are associated with the following three focus areas: (1) Energy Efficiency, (2) Emissions and Pollution Control, and (3) Climate Resilience and Adaptation. Optional and other ‘Best’ strategies will be considered and discussed in further detail during the current and future design stages.

Additionally, the 100% concept includes a site-specific climate change vulnerability assessment (Appendix B), the first of its kind for a Milwaukee County capital project. As is now mandatory for a project of this scale, the project team conducted the site-specific vulnerability assessment using local climate data, focusing on current hazards and referencing the County-wide Vulnerability Assessment, which is a key piece of the Climate Action 2050 Plan ([File 25-262](#)). The risk assessment scores and impact considerations associated with the vulnerability assessment are being used to inform design and implementation decisions as necessary.

Campus Energy Systems Decision

During the design phase, while using a campus-wide systems approach, an important consideration emerged: whether to include an expandable Central Utility Plant (CUP) in the IJCC project, specifically within the new courthouse, to accommodate future heating and cooling requirements for the complex.

The IJCC team identified this as an opportunity to positively impact Milwaukee County by:

- Reducing long-term operating expenses
- Minimizing future capital expenditures
- Advancing significant emission reduction targets
- Mitigating risks associated with district steam energy

Following in-depth investigation of 7+ options using the IJCC decision making summary, as well as an endorsement from the IJCC Advisory Council, the recommendation (Appendix C) was made to commit to an expandable CUP as part of the new criminal courthouse. This path forward enables future flexibility for campus-wide decarbonization, aligning with the goals of Milwaukee County's Climate Action 2050 Plan. Additionally, it will reduce risk, increase flexibility and maintainability, and be a cost-effective solution long-term. The design and cost estimate for IJCC are reflective of this CUP enabling work.

Stakeholder and Community Engagement

Stakeholder engagement efforts continue to evolve alongside the project as Milwaukee County transitions from conceptual design to funding discussions and future implementation planning. To support informed decision-making, the project team is developing updated fact sheets and communication materials that summarize the current condition of the Public Safety Building, the anticipated improvements associated with the new courthouse, and key data points illustrating expected benefits for court operations, public safety, visitor experience, and system outcomes. These resources are intended to support County Supervisors in responding to constituent questions and communicating the purpose and long-term value of the project.

The stakeholder engagement strategy also includes continued communication with the County Board through committee presentations, individual Supervisor briefings, and written project updates. Planned outreach includes topics such as improved services for victims and witnesses, the extensive stakeholder engagement that informed the conceptual design, economic and workforce development opportunities associated with construction, and the project's alignment with Milwaukee County's Climate Action Plan.

As the project advances toward the 2027 budget process, engagement efforts will increasingly focus on equipping policymakers and community members with accessible, factual information regarding project costs, funding strategies, anticipated benefits, and implementation timelines. Additional community engagement activities are being planned to support future budget discussions and ensure residents continue to have opportunities to learn about the project and provide feedback.

V. Next Steps

The project will be considered through Milwaukee County's established Capital Improvement Committee process in 2026, requesting capital funding for relocation, demolition, and

construction expenses. Through this request, DAS will request allocation of tax levy funds (\$15.8 million) in 2027 as freed-up by State EPA in addition to bond authorization for the remaining projected project costs. The next program report is planned for September 2026.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department of Administrative Services and the Office of Strategy, Budget and Performance respectfully request that this informational report be received and placed on file.

FISCAL EFFECT

The report is informational only and there is no fiscal impact.

PREPARED BY:

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ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the strategic plan:

3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities

3B: Enhance the County’s fiscal health and sustainability

3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A - Sustainable Design Standards Scorecard and Project Tracker
Appendix B - Sustainable Design Standards Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment
Appendix C - Energy Systems Decision