

MILWAUKEE COUNTY
Inter-Office Communication

Date: April 22, 2026

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

From: Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Ashley Adsit, Director of Project & Performance Management, Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance

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](#), and [26-315](#).

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The existing Courthouse Complex facilities are severely outdated and, in some cases, functionally obsolete, presenting significant public safety and security issues.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 Public Safety Building was designed with partnership in mind; to serve several jurisdictions and purposes. Milwaukee County fully took over the building in 1971. The 322,000 square foot building is now home to the Milwaukee County criminal courts, County Sheriff and District Attorney's offices, and other related uses.

The State's largest Judicial District is in Milwaukee County 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.
 - \$500,000 is 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 \$75M in deferred system replacements, not including code and safety issues. Upgrading the building to current code would cost an estimated \$150M (as of 2017), which still would not address inefficient and unsafe layout of the facility. With inflationary factors considered, deferred maintenance and code compliance upgrades would cost an estimated \$334M without resolving unusable, obsolete building space issues.

The 2017 Milwaukee County Courthouse Advisory Group recommended to replace the facility and consider the functionality of the other buildings in the Courthouse Complex. Due to the integrated nature of the current Public Safety Building and other Judicial Complex facilities, this work will influence the renovations and optimizations that will be needed across existing facilities to maximize efficiency and resources.

II. Project Progress

This report provides an update on Milwaukee County’s Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex (IJCC) project which was reinvigorated in 2024.

Four work groups have been established to advance key project activities, with centralized support and coordination by the Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance (SBP) 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. 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.

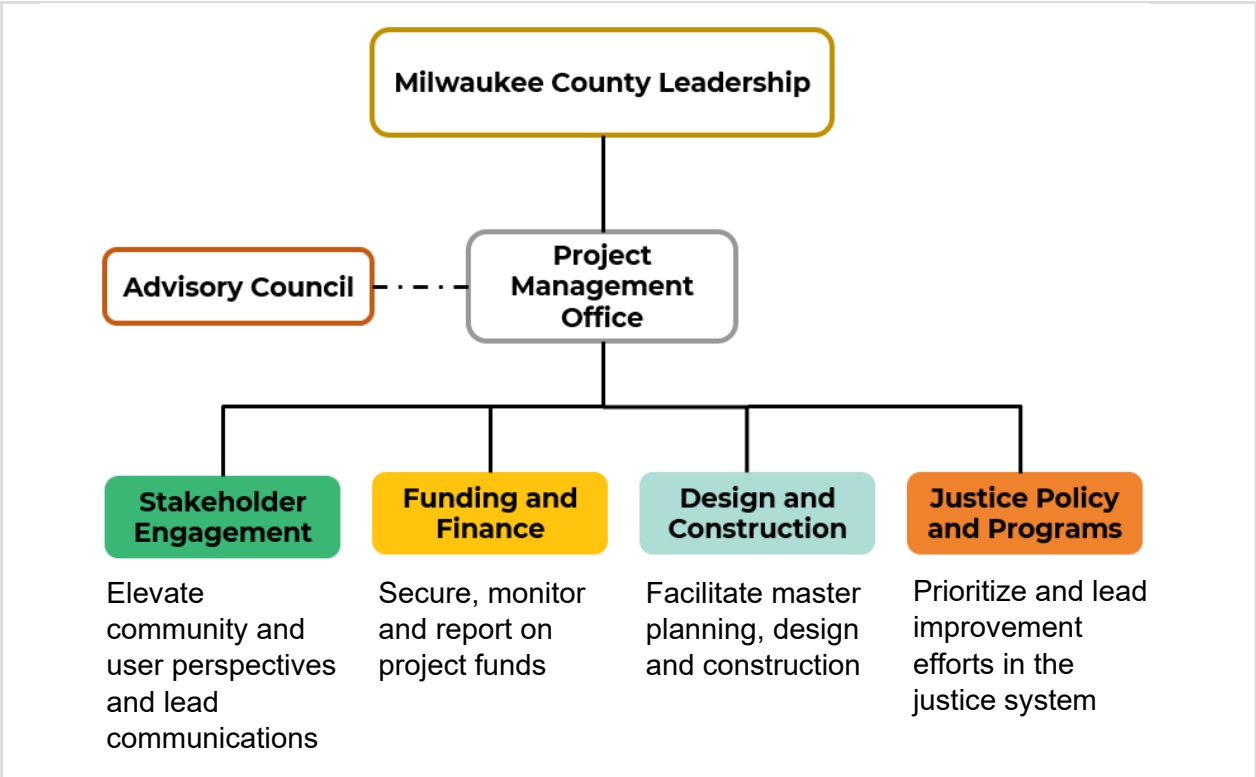


Diagram A: Structure of Support

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. Conceptual Design and Master Planning is currently underway and expected to be complete in the second quarter of 2026. Future design phases include Schematic Design (June 2026–April 2027), and Design Development (April 2027–January 2028). These phases will build upon programming outputs and align project scope with available resources. Regular updates will be provided as each phase progresses. Phase IV of this work spans multiple years as outlined below.



Table A: 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	Q1 2026
Pre-Construction	Q4 2024	Q2 2028
Enabling Phase Relocation	Q1 2027	Q1 2028
Safety Building Demolition	Q2 2028	Q1 2029
New Justice Facility Construction	Q1 2029	Q1 2032
Historic Courthouse Renovation	Q1 2032	Q1 2033

Re-envisioning Justice in Milwaukee County

The IJCC project is intentionally designed to improve justice system outcomes, not solely to construct new facilities. 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 A.

Table A: IJCC Justice Policy and Programs: Values Setting

Value	How This Value Is Built into the Project
Safety and Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New signage and digital displays for improved wayfinding Use technology and virtual resources to improve court access
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social hubs and meeting spaces planned for in the new facility and the historic courthouse
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering multiple avenues for community updates and feedback, including surveys, tours, presentations, roadshows, website, and a shared inbox
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create private areas for system-impacted families and individuals, including respite rooms and attorney-client meeting spaces
Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizing a three-pronged decision-making framework for IJCC project decisions, balancing stakeholder feedback, fiscal feasibility, and best practices
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate space for problem-solving courts

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

Ongoing engagement with the CJC and justice partners will continue throughout 2026 as conceptual design is finalized and future phases advance.

Design & Construction Progress

Conceptual design and Historic Courthouse master planning continue to advance in an integrated approach, aligning enabling/swing space needs, long-term operational efficiency, and justice system outcomes. Since the last report, the project’s design and construction team reviewed and provided feedback on a 100% conceptual design package that included blocking and stacking as well as floor plan options. Design feedback is being informed by operational data, peer comparisons, and process improvement efforts related to court scheduling and service delivery. Overall, the project team is focusing on design progress through a systems outcome and fiscal impact lens.

Fiscal considerations are embedded throughout the design process. To date, the project and consulting teams implemented strategies that challenge program square footage, maximize use of the Historic Courthouse in lieu of additional swing space or expanded new construction, manage long-term operating costs, improve energy efficiency, and eliminate deferred maintenance associated with the Public Safety Building.

Conceptual design will be concluded in the second quarter of 2026. This milestone will translate programming requirements into more defined site layouts, building forms, and spatial relationships. By refining the size, configuration, and scope of the overall project, the conceptual design work will enable the project team to prepare more accurate construction cost estimates based on specific systems, materials, and building features. These firmer estimates will allow Milwaukee County to understand the overall capital financial requirements and will be the foundation for the project's 2027 capital budget request. The 2027 request will move the project into schematic design and, ultimately, construction.

Key elements under development that will influence system outcomes include a dedicated problem-solving courts floor, respite and attorney-client meeting spaces, improved public entry and wayfinding, and efficient court configurations that support three-way separation between the public, staff, and in-custody individuals. These components reflect feedback received from the community, justice involved individuals, staff, advocates/partners, etc. These solutions were created in response to major pain points and trauma experienced by individuals who have engaged with the justice system in the Milwaukee County Courthouse Complex.

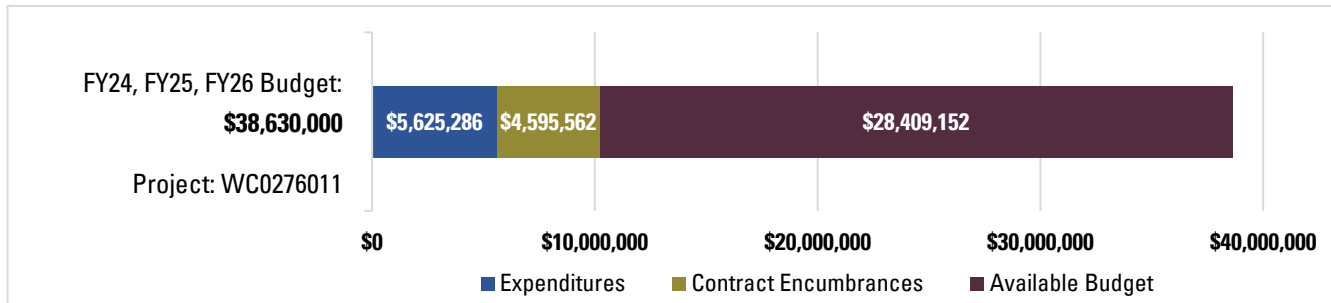
Master planning for the Historic Courthouse is also underway, focusing on highest-and-best-use strategies for that building. As part of this effort, the design consultants are working to delineate priorities that are necessary, enabling, or complementary to the IJCC project as compared to those that should be embedded in longer-term capital improvement plans. This approach will help control construction costs, avoid creating excess capacity in the new building, and reduce the risk of significant vacant spaces in the Historic Courthouse.

Funding & Finance

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 patrol services, 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.

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

Chart A: IJCC Capital Project Budget



A comprehensive fiscal impact report addressing operating costs, debt capacity, capital backlog, and countywide fiscal impacts is planned for presentation to the Board of Supervisors in July 2026. This report will be provided in collaboration with the Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance, Office of the Comptroller, and Department of Administrative Services.

Stakeholder and Community Engagement

Internal engagement remains focused on preparing Courthouse Complex tenants for enabling/swing space transitions, supporting operational changes, and maintaining continuity of services. Departments have been engaged through targeted meetings, space planning discussions, and early change management efforts.

Externally, the County continues to engage community members, justice partners, and elected officials through courthouse tours, community presentations, budget listening sessions, roadshows, and multilingual communication tools. A 2026 communications strategy emphasizes system outcomes, sustainability, fiscal health, and transparency, and will include regular Board updates, Supervisor orientations, media engagement, budget hearings, and community gatherings. Through this work, the stakeholder engagement work group is focused on ensuring an understanding of and connection to the IJCC project by community members and policymakers.

III. Next Steps

As stated, capital funding for a portion of relocation, demolition, and construction expenses are expected to be requested in 2027 and reflect state contributions. Capital construction funding requests will span multiple fiscal years. The Board will be kept up to date on funding requests through regular reports from Administration. The next expected report is planned for June 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