

MILWAUKEE COUNTY
Inter-Office Communication

Date: June 16, 2025

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](#), and [24-44](#).

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The existing Courthouse Complex facilities are severely outdated and, in some cases, functionally obsolete, presenting significant public safety and security issues.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.

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. Project Progress

This report provides an update on Milwaukee County's Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex project. The project seeks to modernize the County's core justice facilities by replacing the nearly 100-year-old Public Safety Building and enhancing operations in the Historic Courthouse and Criminal Justice Facility through facility design and process improvement. Progress continues across all major project areas, including stakeholder and community engagement, justice policies and programs, funding and finance, and design and programming activities.

This initiative is rooted in a set of comprehensive goals that balance safety, functionality, efficiency, community needs, sustainability, and future-flexibility, while ensuring Milwaukee County can meet its state-mandated responsibilities in a fiscally sustainable manner.

Stakeholder and Community Engagement

Engagement efforts have been multi-faceted, involving direct input from stakeholders, system leaders, and the public. The Office of Equity's Community Engagement Framework is guiding this process to ensure voices across the county are heard. Since the last report, three community listening sessions were hosted, and the project was featured in the March Community Brainstorm conversation. Translation services were made available at each of these events. These conversations focused on user experience and design elements such as service linkages, navigation, and general amenities. A key theme that emerged was the importance of centering mental health in both design and service access.

The project team will expand engagement by attending existing community meetings and planning additional sessions in suburban municipalities. Courthouse tours were also facilitated for stakeholders such as state legislators, board supervisors, community groups, police chiefs, and others to experience existing conditions and envision the future project. The tour route included the Historic Courthouse, courtroom spaces in the Public Safety Building, and jail transfer pathways. Approximately 150 individuals took part in the tours.

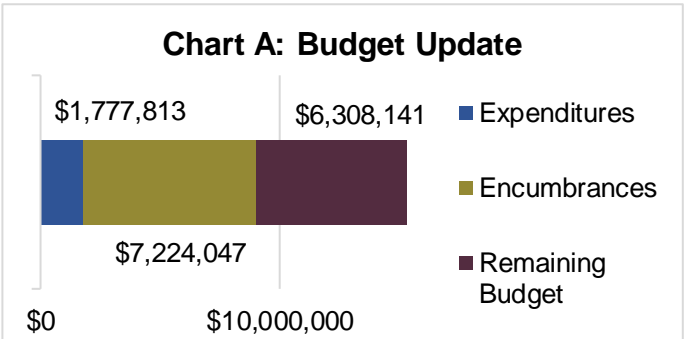
Milwaukee County’s media strategy has further amplified public awareness of the project. Following the Governor’s capital budget announcement and the Joint Finance Committee public hearing in West Allis, multiple news releases were issued. Coverage appeared in outlets including Wisconsin Public Radio, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Urban Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin Examiner. The County also hosted a media tour and promoted a youth apprenticeship event with project consultants. Announcements regarding the Construction Manager at Risk selection and other promotional opportunities are expected soon.

Justice Policy and Program Alignment

In April 2025, Milwaukee County with the National Center for State Courts hosted a workshop with local justice system and community leaders to discuss opportunities to strengthen cross-system collaboration and define shared priorities. This effort was supported by interviews and surveys with justice system stakeholders prior to the workshop. Additional surveys have been distributed to judicial and court staff, including judges, clerks, bailiffs, and court reporters to complete discovery on these topics. A final report summarizing key priorities and next steps for the judicial system is anticipated by the end of June 2025. Actionable items will be woven into the operations of lead justice policy and programs partner, the Community Justice Center.

Funding & Finance

The County Board previously approved a combined FY2024/FY2025 project budget of \$15.45 million for courthouse complex planning under Project WC0276011. Funds have been encumbered and expended as detailed in Chart A for planning and design efforts. The remaining funds will be allocated for a Construction Manager, cost validation consultant, and other technical needs.



The County continues to advance a shared funding strategy that recognizes the state’s shared responsibility for mandated services. Nearly 80% of Milwaukee County’s local property tax levy is consumed by state-mandated services. A state partnership to support annual debt service would help alleviate structural inequities that compromise local fiscal capacity and bring Milwaukee County in line with other counties.

Milwaukee County requested funding support for the Investing in Justice: Courthouse Complex project through both state and federal channels. As part of the 2025-27 State Biennial Budget process, the County submitted a capital request to the State of Wisconsin, emphasizing the project’s alignment with state-mandated responsibilities and the urgent need to replace the aging Public Safety Building. The Governor included \$25 million for the Courthouse Complex in his Capital Budget proposal.

In parallel, Milwaukee County pursued federal support by submitting requests for Congressionally Directed Spending through Wisconsin's U.S. Senate and House delegation. These federal requests for the maximum amount allowable, \$6 million, seek to complement state and local funding by advancing shared goals related to public safety, access to justice, and infrastructure. Results from the state budget process in July 2025 will influence the project's capital budget request through Milwaukee County's annual budget process to continue design processes. The current forecast for a 2026 capital budget request is between six and eleven million dollars and allows the county to avoid disruption to planning and design processes.

In relation to state mandates, Milwaukee County is the only county in Wisconsin required to patrol the expressway and that operates both a separate jail and correctional facility. In 2024 alone, Milwaukee County spent \$16 million to patrol expressways (projected to cost \$20M by 2029) and saved the state \$20.6 million by partnering with their Department of Corrections at the Community Reintegration Center (CRC). The combined impact of these two unique state mandates alone would nearly cash flow the estimated \$37 million in annual debt service needed for the new courthouse facility.

Operational cost savings also support the fiscal case for investment. The current Courthouse Complex consumes nearly \$3.9 million in utilities annually. In a more efficient building, aligning energy use with average energy consumption could yield annual savings of \$880,000. Additionally, the configuration of the current Public Safety Building requires a minimum 1:1 bailiff-to-occupant ratio for transfers, whereas the County's preferred policy allows 1:5 where safety permits—suggesting significant personnel efficiencies post-construction, potentially reaching an 80% reduction in staff time required for transports. An additional \$500,000 per year is currently spent on emergency repairs that could be redirected once the facility is replaced.

Design and Construction Progress

The project is currently in the Programming and Master Planning Phase, which began in October 2024 and will conclude in 2025. This phase defines the courthouse's functional needs, space requirements, and operational goals based on extensive internal and stakeholder input. Highlights include:

- Over 45 programming workshops and 40 additional meetings have been conducted by the design consultants. Departmental program confirmations for both the Criminal and Historic Courthouses are underway.
- Process improvement is being informed by interviews with 28 departments and identification of 27 process improvement opportunities. Of those, 20 will be addressed through design, while 8 have been referred for further process improvement using Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, and Control (DMAIC) methodology.

- The Existing Conditions Report is nearing final approval and includes evaluations of mechanical, electrical, plumbing, lighting, and security systems, along with structural integrity, code compliance, historical considerations, and accessibility.
- The project's sustainability framework is complete and aligned with Milwaukee County's commitment to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. The Sustainable Design Standards include focus areas such as energy efficiency, emissions reduction, water conservation, climate resilience, waste management, occupant health, and community engagement.
- Adaptable Workplace Standards were developed to support modern, equitable, and efficient work environments by defining space types that balance collaboration, privacy, and flexibility across County departments. Development of workplace standards ensure consistency across facilities, while accommodating hybrid and collaborative work modes. The Workplace Standards will also help inform furniture, storage, and technology planning as the project moves into later design phases.

Workplace Standards and Sustainability Standards were developed under the Master Planning Phase and will be adopted for enterprise-wide use within Milwaukee County.

II. Project Timeline

The programming process, including site selection, will continue throughout 2025. Master Planning has already started and is expected to be completed in March 2026. Future design phases include Conceptual Design (April 2025–March 2026), Schematic Design (March 2026–October 2026), and Design Development (October 2026–July 2027). 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	Q1 2028
Justice Policy & Program Action Planning	Q3 2024	Sustained in CJC
Process Improvement	Q4 2024	Q3 2025
Pre-Construction	Q4 2024	Q4 2027
Relocation and Demo	Q1 2027	Q4 2028
New Justice Facility Construction	Q1 2029	Q4 2031
Historic Courthouse Renovation	Q4 2031	Q4 2032

In accordance with this design and construction timeline, annual requests for funding will be presented to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors. The extent of those requests will be contingent upon state funding commitments and cost estimate confirmation throughout the design and pre-construction phases. Additional cost contributors, such as swing space, will also influence funding needs and requests. Capital funding for a portion of relocation, demo, and construction expenses are expected to be requested in the 2027 budget cycle and reflect state, and federal contributions. Capital construction funding requests will span multiple fiscal years. The Board will be kept up to date on anticipated and actual funding requests through regular reports from Administration. The next expected report is planned for September 2025.

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