

MILWAUKEE COUNTY
Inter-Office Communication

Date: September 8, 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](#), [24-44](#), and [25-411](#).

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The existing Courthouse Complex facilities are severely outdated and, in some cases, functionally obsolete, presenting significant public safety and security issues.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

Since the last report to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors in June 2025, a major fiscal accomplishment has been achieved and conceptual design processes are well underway. Progress continues across other project areas, including stakeholder and community engagement, justice policies and programs, and design and construction.

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.

Funding & Finance

Milwaukee County advanced a funding request for the IJCC project as part of the 2025–27 State Biennial Budget process, emphasizing both the urgent need to replace the Public Safety Building and the County's unique role in delivering costly state-mandated services. Following this advocacy, Governor Evers incorporated \$225 million for the project into his Executive Budget proposal.

The State has not funded courthouse projects for other counties and, therefore, legislators expressed concerns about setting a precedent and prioritized maintaining uniformity across counties. As referenced in File 25-573, the County advanced a creative compromise that acknowledged the shared responsibility for delivering state-mandated services. Milwaukee County is the only county in Wisconsin required to provide expressway patrol through the Sheriff's Office, a service that is estimated to cost approximately \$19 million in 2025 (including fringe benefits and overhead costs currently in non-department budgets) and is

projected to reach over \$20 million in future years. Legislators agreed to provide direct state funding for Milwaukee County’s expressway patrol services, thereby “creating uniformity” with other counties, while freeing up equivalent local resources to be applied toward the IJCC project.

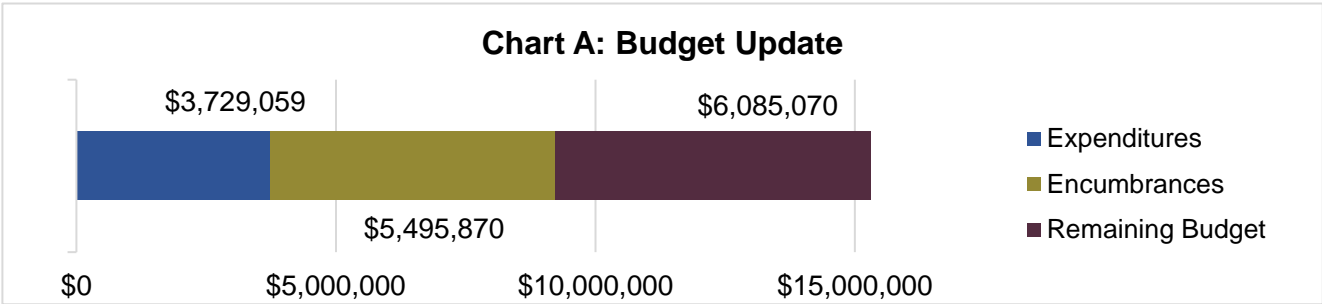
The adopted biennial budget included increases of \$18 million in the first year and \$20 million in the second year for this purpose. This action enables Milwaukee County to finance critical initiatives such as the IJCC while reducing the impact on taxpayers. File 25-583 further describes the policy framework and budget process that will be implemented to achieve this outcome and allocate funds to the IJCC capital project.

With nearly 80% of Milwaukee County’s local property tax levy consumed by state-mandated services, this legislation was significant for the viability of the IJCC project. It is a step towards alleviating structural inequities that compromise local fiscal capacity and bring Milwaukee County in line with other counties.

In addition, the County submitted Congressionally Directed Spending requests totaling \$6 million through Wisconsin’s U.S. Senate and House delegation. While the 2026 requests did not advance due to federal ineligibility for infrastructure projects, the County will continue pursuing federal partnership opportunities.

At the local level, a 2026 capital budget request of \$11,101,280 has been submitted to continue phased planning and design. This amount allows the county to avoid disruption to these processes, keeping the project on track for relocation, demolition, and new construction as soon as 2027-2032.

The County Board previously approved a combined FY2024/FY2025 project budget of \$15.3 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.



Design and Construction Progress

The project is progressing in the pre-design phase, with multiple workstreams advancing in parallel. Recent progress includes drafting programming and space needs reports for the new facility, conducting a caseload analysis to confirm number of courtrooms required, documenting existing conditions in both the Public Safety Building and Historic Courthouse,

cataloging courthouse artifacts, finalizing process improvement targets and beginning to address those targets, and gathering peer-to-peer data through site visits to other jurisdictions.

The County's design and construction team is reviewing initial drafts of 30% conceptual design package for the new facility, including blocking and stacking options, and has refined the scope for process improvement opportunities. Master planning for the Historic Courthouse is underway, focusing on highest-and-best-use strategies. As part of this effort, the County is prioritizing strategies to make full and efficient use of the Historic Courthouse. The goal is to determine which services and offices can continue to operate effectively there, reserving the new facility for only those functions that require purpose-built spaces. 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.

A swing space strategy is being outlined to ensure continuity of operations during construction, with an emphasis on limiting disruption to Historic Courthouse functions and services while identifying the most suitable locations for current tenants of the Public Safety Building. The stakeholder engagement team will be active in communicating with offices to seek cooperation and ensure relocations are coordinated, cost-effective, and supportive of long-term facility goals.

Swing space strategy will prioritize offices that provide frequent, direct services to the public in the Historic Courthouse to maintain accessibility and minimize public confusion. The plan will match department space needs to available swing space and ensure relocation supports long-term operational efficiency, while keeping departments that require close coordination with other functions in proximity to one another. The strategy will also factor in relocation, renovation, and ongoing operating costs when comparing options. There will be higher consideration for relocation to administrative or internal-facing departments that have low public traffic and fewer operational dependencies. While the strategy is still under development, at this point, the design team is prioritizing options that avoid disruption to elected offices during swing space transitions within the Historic Courthouse. Ultimately, the swing space plan will consider the long-term master plan and ensure moves align with the vision for maximizing Historic Courthouse use post-construction.

Upcoming work over the next six months includes finalizing key reports, completing the swing space strategy, conducting sustainability workshops, completing Historic Courthouse master planning, coordinating with authorities having jurisdiction, completing a hazardous material assessment, scoping projects to facilitate swing space strategy implementation, and finalizing the energy system master plan.

Significantly, conceptual design is anticipated to be completed in the second quarter of 2026. This milestone will translate programming requirements and master planning work 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 rather than broad planning assumptions. These firmer estimates will allow Milwaukee County to understand the overall capital financial requirements and will be the foundation for the project's FY27 capital budget request – the project's first significant request for capital construction funding. The FY27 request will move the project into schematic design and, ultimately, construction.

Stakeholder and Community Engagement

Internal engagement efforts are focused on establishing regular touchpoints with occupants of the Public Safety Building and Historic Courthouse, preparing departments for swing space transitions and supporting leaders with operational and procedural changes. Criteria for temporary relocation include minimizing disruption to public-facing operations and elected offices, ensuring cost-effectiveness, and aligning moves with the long-term master plan for the Historic Courthouse.

Externally, the County has continued comprehensive community engagement through roadshows, courthouse tours, and new tools such as a [video tour](#) (available in English and Spanish). Recent outreach included a presentation to UMOS employees, with upcoming sessions planned for with other community organizations, and Milwaukee County budget listening sessions. Public feedback is also being collected through a Courthouse Visitor Survey accessible through QR code flyers.

Justice Policy and Program Alignment

In partnership with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), the County conducted a collaborative values-setting process that engaged justice system leaders, system-involved stakeholders, and community members through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. This process identified core values—Safety/Security, Collaboration, Trust, Innovation, Community, Efficiency/Accessibility, and Transparency—which will be integrated into both the planning and design of the new facility. The County will continue to work with the Community Justice Council, lead justice policy and programs partner, to embed these values into broader justice system reforms.

II. Project Timeline

Conceptual Design and Master Planning is underway and expected to be completed in the second quarter of 2026. Future design phases include Schematic Design (March 2026–February 2027), and Design Development (February 2027–November 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	Q4 2028
Justice Policy & Program Action Planning	Q3 2024	Sustained in CJC
Process Improvement	Q4 2024	Q1 2026
Pre-Construction	Q4 2024	Q2 2028
Swing Space Relocation	Q3 2027	Q3 2028
Safety Building Demolition	Q1 2028	Q1 2029
New Justice Facility Construction	Q1 2029	Q1 2032
Historic Courthouse Renovation	Q1 2032	Q1 2033

As stated, capital funding for a portion of relocation, demolition, and construction expenses are expected to be requested in the 2027 budget cycle 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 December 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