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County council again raises courthouse option

By [Noah Haglund](#), Herald Writer

EVERETT -- Some Snohomish County leaders want to revisit the idea of building a new courthouse on a parking lot across the street from the county's downtown campus.

Building on the county-owned lot had been ruled out earlier this fall, after County Council members deemed its \$150 million base price too steep.

During a sometimes tense discussion Friday, at least two council members said they'd like to consider the site for a future nine-story building. They're also looking at putting either a seven- or nine-story new justice building on the plaza next to the existing courthouse, at Wall Street and Wetmore Avenue. The base price for those plans is projected at \$110 million or \$120 million, respectively.

"All of the options can be financed, it's just the political will to do it," Councilman Brian Sullivan said.

Political will could come into play when the County Council considers property taxes and other financing measures as part of its 2014 budget. The council is scheduled to vote Nov. 25 on next year's spending plan.

Council members could consider taking banked capacity, which is the allowable 1 percent year-over-year general property tax increases that county opted not to take in years past.

Until a 3 percent increase was approved last year, the county had not upped the general levy in about a decade.

Councilman Dave Somers said he wants to consider the parking-lot option, but stopped short of committing.

"I understand it's a high cost, but there are a lot of benefits to it," he said.

Somers also asked whether the county needs to demolish the old courthouse building if the council chooses to build on the parking lot.

"I want to have the discussion of whether it (the existing courthouse) works for any other purpose," Somers said.

Michael Downes, presiding Superior Court judge, on Friday was frustrated about the back and forth over possible courthouse options. Judges earlier supported a nine-story building at the plaza, when the parking lot appeared to be off the table.

Downes said it would take him time to confer with the 14 other judges who have a stake in the courthouse to see whether they're in support of building across the street. He believes there's some urgency to make a decision.

"The court is concerned that if this isn't dealt with ... it may slide off into the ether and we may never see a building," he said.

County Executive John Lovick's staff this fall laid out the pluses and minuses of each option.

The seven-story courthouse built on the plaza has the best price. However, it's the smallest option and would wouldn't provide space for county deputy prosecuting attorneys or sheriff's office personnel. They would have to move attorneys to the county's Robert Drewel Building and perform an extensive remodel of the Mission Building for sheriff's staff.

Adding two floors would pile on an estimated \$10 million to the cost, but would put all of the relevant law and justice personnel in the same building as the courts.

A drawback for both plans on the plaza site is that they would have to be built in phases, with some work waiting until after the old courthouse is demolished.

On the other hand, the plaza building would connect to the county's existing underground parking garage and to an underground tunnel that's used to transport prisoners from jail to court.

Also, the plaza is right up against the street, making it vulnerable to a truck bomb. To guard against that, the design would need to include armoring or the county would have to seek permission to eliminate parking on Wall Street to reroute the traffic lanes farther from the building.

Building in the parking lot would provide more space than the plaza site, improving aesthetics and security. It also opens up the plaza and the old courthouse for other uses.

Negatives include the higher price, need to buy out or use eminent domain against adjacent property owners, and the elimination of the tunnel for transporting prisoners.

County leaders earlier looked into moving the courts into temporary space, so they could build in the same footprint as the current building. That would have allowed them to set back the building from the street and to complete construction in one phase.

County leaders also might have to spend extra to improve energy-saving features, increase the building's earthquake readiness and harden the shell against terrorist bombs.

Councilman Dave Gossett said he's in favor of efficiency measures that could save money over time, but is skeptical of some of the security improvements.

"We have to remember, we're not building a fortress here," Gossett said. "We're building a public building for the public."

The county earlier this year obtained \$75 million in bonds to pay for a new courthouse building. Lovick's administration soon determined that estimate was insufficient to pay for the new courthouse the county needs.

"There's no guide out there to say what's the right amount of money to spend on a courthouse when you're the third-largest county in the state," Deputy Executive Mark Ericks said.

Gossett and others want to reach a decision quickly, saying "this is a case where time is money."

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