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# **Thurston County won't get a remodeled courthouse after all. Here's what it might get instead**

By Martín Bilbao, The Olympian

Thurston County has pivoted away from remodeling its aging courthouse campus in favor of pursuing a new solution to its facility needs.

The Board of County Commissioners gave county staff the go-ahead last week to scrap already-started plans to remodel its Olympia campus with a \$50 million bond.

Instead, the board directed staff to pursue a pared-back renovation project for the hilltop campus located on Lakeridge Drive. This effort is expected to buy the county's courts and related offices at least five more years on the hilltop while the county devises a plan for a new courthouse.

County Manager Leonard Hernandez asked the board to provide final direction on the remodel project after it had already been paused for about two months. He called it a "significant decision."

"We wouldn't want to keep the \$50 million remodel in abeyance because we're losing momentum and even value of what we can do with that \$50 million," Hernandez said.

This decision represents another turn in the county's years-long efforts to address its pressing space needs. It also comes after the board and a subcommittee spent weeks reviewing the county's options and financial capacity.

While the board has decided to end the costly remodel project, the details of the limited restoration effort have not been finalized and decisions on a long-term solution are still a ways out.

Hernandez said there's a concept for how the county will approach all this, but staff need to lay out steps, get board and stakeholder input, and then ask the board to provide direction on all those components.

## **How much will a new courthouse cost?**

A new courthouse could cost the county about \$250 million, according to county documents from an Aug. 14 board meeting.

That estimate is just for a new courthouse and related law and justice offices. It does not include a new building for the county's administrative offices and departments, which are currently located at The Atrium, a leased office building on Pacific Avenue.

Funding a new courthouse would require a novel funding solution. The board could ask voters to approve a property tax increase — a solution it considered about four years ago.

That plan involved building a new \$250 million courthouse, including an administrative building, at the site of the Lee Creighton Justice Center on Plum Street in downtown Olympia. The board withdrew those plans in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The county still has about \$43 million of the \$50 million bond it issued in 2022 for the now-scrapped remodel project, county documents show.

County staff also estimates that the county could sell its hilltop campus property for about \$27 million, although that figure may change with a new appraisal, Hernandez said.

Both of those options could help reduce the price tag of a new courthouse to about \$180 million, according to the documents.

### **What may be done with the existing campus?**

An interim option to renovate the existing courthouse campus calls for vacating three of the county's buildings on a block along Lakeridge Drive and Evergreen Park Drive, county documents show.

These buildings, officially numbered 4, 6 and 7, could be sold or demolished to build a new courthouse or administrative building.

Aerial view of existing Thurston County Courthouse buildingsAn aerial view of the existing Thurston County Courthouse buildings at Lakeridge Drive in Olympia. The buildings are numbered and the parking lots are lettered.

Early cost estimates indicate the county could spend \$1 million to \$2 million of the 2022 bond and about \$500,000 to \$1 million in other funds for furniture and equipment, county documents say.

Rick Thomas, capital projects planning manager for Thurston County, told the board that the \$1 million to \$2 million would be for a "very minimal amount of work."

"It's really assuming that we're almost going to be moving people in as is, and so there could not be very many real changes made to the space for that kind of money," Thomas said. "It's just minor, minor changes in order to make people fit."

This plan would shuffle some offices and departments among remaining buildings. Thomas said this plan should give the Prosecuting Attorney's Office and Public Defense a little bit more space for the interim period until a long-term solution is finalized.

Hernandez cautioned that all these options and cost estimates are still preliminary and subject to change.

"Commissioners, what I would say is, rather than describe this as a plan, I would describe it as an exercise," Hernandez said. "An exercise of looking at what are options, knowing that we would have to operationalize that with our stakeholders to come up with a real, set plan."

To realize any solution, Hernandez said the county will need support from local and perhaps even state agencies. To get that support, he said the county will have to reframe the narrative for the task at hand.

"This has been a decade's issue, problem, if you were," Hernandez said. "We have to really figure out, 'How do we reposition this to be an opportunity?'"