

FEATURE

by Arthur Pizzano and Rick Tripp



Local facilities periodically become outdated. When replacement of a public building is contemplated, the site planning process usually begins with utilitarian considerations, that is, available property, cost, access, and related issues. Unfortunately, locational decisions do not always fully consider the value that a public building investment can bring to stimulating private sector growth. The example in Fairfield, Ohio, is one that a community of any size can consider.

THE SITUATION

Fairfield is located north of Cincinnati just outside the I-275 beltway and is home to approximately 45,000 people. The city has a local employment base approaching 35,000 jobs, and the community has historically managed its finances well. It has been fortunate to have had sufficient capital to keep up with the growth and modernization needs of its infrastructure, including public buildings, roads, utilities, and parks.

In the late 1990s, the police department found itself in an increasingly compromised position from a facilities perspective. Headquarters had become undersized, outdated, and inefficient. (The building had been a restaurant before its renovation as a police facility a decade or so earlier.)

There was just one restroom per 100 occupants, support staff didn't have the space they needed, the lobby was too small and frequently had to be used for interviewing crime victims, the areas for prisoner processing weren't secure enough, and the evidence processing system

was inadequate to the point that there were worries about whether evidence would hold up in a court of law. The department's location also was physically disconnected from the city's core.

Fairfield's police department has been accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies since 2003. The department is a full-service organization, with dispatching responsibilities for police and fire department personnel, and is composed of 61 sworn officers and a civilian support staff of 25 employees. The department consists of road patrol, vice squad, investigations, a D.A.R.E. program to prevent drug use, school resource officers, K-9 officers, a juvenile diversion counselor, and a bike patrol.

In 2009, the department processed 23,000 total calls for service. The municipal court has a staff of 38, and the facility includes a main courtroom along with a secondary magistrate's courtroom. It processed 9,900 cases in 2009.



Concerts are held at the Village Green Park amphitheater.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

During the early and mid-1990s, Fairfield created a downtown master plan that involved conducting a self-assessment. The elected officials noted that the city, developed as a 1950s postwar suburban community, had no identifiable downtown business district and, thus, no real sense of identity.

Officials decided that they needed to look at sites in the vicinity of where city hall—the building in which the police and courts had previously been housed—had historically been located, to site the town center. The historic intersection of two major roadways helped to define this centrally located area. The southwest quadrant had an underused 120-acre tract of land that looked promising for initiation of a major public-private partnership, mixed-use development. This unique opportunity proved to work to the city's advantage in facilitating its vision.

Staff worked closely with a local landowner and developer to design a planned unit development consisting of 160 in-town family homes and a variety of retail, office, and public uses. The developer also agreed to donate a two-acre parcel that would be used as a public park and serve as the main centerpiece for the town center. The project was named the Fairfield Village Green.

The city developed an outdoor amphitheater, playground, fountains, grassy knolls, and a pedestrian stone bridge within the park. It also constructed a 25,000-square-foot public library

and a 40,000-square-foot community arts center that mutually reinforce the unique nature of the Village Green with the complementing park and amphitheater.

As the city started to make plans to expand its new Village Green city center, the police department had a choice: (1) take the traditional path of making the case for its needs independently or (2) strategically make the case for a new facility within the context of how it would add value to the city's larger vision of economic development in its evolving downtown. Partnering with the city would require collaboration—something that individual departments sometimes dismiss as cumbersome and time-consuming.

Selecting an available vacant lot merely because of its inexpensive price tag, for example, might well represent an expedient choice, but it also might run the risk of being a short-sighted solution. In Fairfield's case, linking the department's operational needs with the city's desire to stay focused on developing a true community identity enabled the police department to position itself to get a high-quality building in a prime location that will meet its needs well into the future.



Aerial view of the Fairfield, Ohio, Town Center. Village Green is in the foreground; Justice Center is circled in red.

In an effort to stimulate planning for its facility replacement needs, the police department and municipal court requisitioned a needs analysis. This was a key initiative as the city started contemplating locations for the police and courts. Officials began looking at an undersized grocery store in the vicinity of the town center area. The store was part of a strip mall situated on 8.8 acres.

The supermarket's long-term lease was scheduled to expire, and, since the store was likely to close, the city wanted to facilitate its relocation. It subsequently became the commercial anchor in the Village Green development situated a block away.

Meanwhile, the city purchased the old building, razed the site, and then commenced construction of the new justice center on the cleared property. The 45,000-square-foot justice center cost approximately \$9.6 million to construct. It contains state-of-the-art facilities for the police department, including patrol operations, investigations, property and evidence processing, a processing laboratory, and vehicle processing facilities.

There are also holding facilities with access for police and court personnel. The municipal court consists of a large main courtroom, a magistrate's courtroom, court clerk functions, and administrative space for all related court functions.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

In addition to the need to meet the operational needs of the police department, the city benefited from the economic stimulus spinoffs of investing in a new, centrally located justice center. It also facilitated the city's ability to:

- Concentrate the police and court employee payroll of \$7.5 million within the town center area, thus bolstering the potential for downtown retail success.
- Develop an additional 195,000 square feet of retail and office space within the town center. This aesthetically designed development became fully occupied in just two years.
- Facilitate the construction of new restaurants and several commercial buildings, including replacement of the undersized grocery with a new prototypical 72,000-square-foot store, to a site that now anchors the Village Green area's commercial component of the mixed-use project.



Fairfield's Justice Center.

LESSONS LEARNED

Locating the police department on a prime piece of real estate in the heart of the community has elevated its profile. In turn, the project has reinforced departmental pride and esprit de corps. Not only does the inclusion of updated technology and security allow the officers and staff to do their jobs more effectively, but the new building has also enhanced their presence as partners within the greater community.

The successful path of the police department was clear: position the department to meet its operational needs while embracing the city's overall vision. The results have increased departmental effectiveness; enabled citizens to reap the benefits of an evolving, modern downtown; and advanced the city's overriding goal of creating a dynamic sense of community identity.

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