

Salem City Council faces critics of new Civic Center

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Thomas N. Green Jr. / Special to the Statesman

Councilor Thomas vacates seat

Salem City Council took a moment to say goodbye to Councilor Sheryl Thomas, Ward 6, at the beginning of its Monday night meeting. “This has been an awesome experience for me,” Thomas said. “It’s been fun; it’s been hectic; it’s been joyful.” Thomas is leaving Oregon for Atlanta. Salem City Recorder Kathy Hall previously said the council would likely start looking for a replacement in April. City statute allows the council to fill the vacancy until a new

councilor is elected this November. The seven remaining councilors took a moment to say their public goodbyes, which ended in applause and a standing ovation from the crowd. “You will be missed,” Councilor Chuck Bennett, Ward 1, said. “It’s going to be a real loss for us.”

A steady stream of Salem residents voiced their support for seismic upgrades for the city’s Civic Center, but they questioned the estimated \$80.5 million price tag.

The [City of Salem Civic Center](#) was built in 1972. The city says not only has it outgrown the facility, but City Hall and the Police Department no longer meet national standards for earthquake readiness.

Council has been looking at replacing or relocating the center since 2007.

An initial concept proposed in October 2013 recommends constructing a new police facility on Commercial Street SE, rebuilding the parking structure, replacing City Council chambers and one municipal courtroom, and making seismic upgrades to the library.

Architect Geoffrey James, who spoke on behalf of [Salem Community Vision](#), offered an alternative proposal with a price tag of \$40 million — sparking a heated exchange with both Councilor Laura Tesler, Ward 2, and Salem Mayor Anna Peterson.

Tesler and the mayor repeatedly asked how James arrived at his number.

“I fail to understand how a price could be placed on seismic upgrade repairs without engineering studies,” Peterson said.

James also recommended considering alternative locations for the police department as a cost-saving measure, and Peterson countered by saying the city looked at 16 alternative locations.

“I want to dispel what I’m hearing that we have not been open; that we have not been available to the public,” Peterson said. “This is not a city council or a city government that lightheartedly drew up plans.”

Northgate Neighborhood Association chair Don Russo wrote a letter asking council to build the facility in the Northgate area, saying “crime rates are consistently highest in the north Salem area.”

Tesler said that she was hesitant to select that site because it would remove a potentially attractive piece of property from city tax rolls.

The estimated cost for the bond measure as proposed is 41 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, or about \$61 per year on a home worth \$150,000.

The council meeting Monday night was a public hearing only, and councilors indicated it was not likely they would put a bond issue on the November ballot.

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