

## New debate over police site

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A view of the Vern Miller Civic Center in Salem on Friday, Dec. 9, 2011. / DANIELLE PETERSON | Statesman Jo

### What's next

City officials have met with Salem residents to address questions and concerns about the proposed redesign of Vern Miller Civic Center. In February, Salem City Council is expected to review a staff report that outlines information gathered during the public outreach campaign. The city has discussed the potential of having a \$70 million bond measure for civic center improvements on the November 2014 ballot.

Plans for a new headquarters for Salem police have focused on a proposed three-story building at the Vern Miller Civic Center. But some neighbors have suggested an alternative location: a gritty area in northeast Salem that could use a boost.

Members of the Northgate Neighborhood Association voted unanimously to ask city leaders to consider vacant land at 3350 Portland Road NE as the future home of the Salem Police Department. The flat, nearly 14-acre parcel on Portland Road NE is owned by the Larry and Jeanette Epping Family Foundation.

"The project can make a dramatic impact on urban blight in the area and strengthen quality of life for the many residents who live and work nearby," the Northgate Neighborhood Association stated in a letter to city officials.

Neighbors are making their views known as the city discusses a proposed \$70 million seismic upgrade and redesign of the Vern Miller Civic Center. The improvements for the complex of city offices at 555 Liberty St. SE would include a new 75,000-square-foot police station.

The Vern Miller Civic Center's central location is one of the reasons it became the city's top choice for a new police headquarters.

A contingent of Salem residents, however, have raised concerns about the project's design and cost. Some suggest it's time to think about moving police headquarters away from the downtown core. It's difficult to determine how a change in location might affect the project's cost.

Don Russo, chairman of the Northgate Neighborhood Association, said neighbors envision a police station serving as an anchor for a public-private development along Portland Road NE. Development on the site, commonly called the Epping property, could include a park with basketball courts, housing and retail shops, he said.

A northeast Salem police station would improve police response times in neighborhood with a higher

crime rate, Russo said. He also said that a larger presence of police officers in Northgate could provide positive role models for neighborhood youth.

“This is low-income, low-education and high-crime; those are just a given,” Russo said of the neighborhood’s demographics.

Police Chief Jerry Moore said he understood the sentiments of Northgate neighbors, but he maintains that the Vern Miller Civic Center site is the best location.

Special police units, such as the bomb squad, can deploy faster with a central city location, Moore said. The Vern Miller Civic Center, where police have been based for four decades, also allows Salem residents to access a variety of city services in one place.

Three years ago, a city council subcommittee identified about 30 possible locations for a new police station, according to a city report.

The site on Portland Road NE was among the sites reviewed by the city.

Larry Epping, a Salem developer, in 2004 transferred his ownership of the land to the Larry and Jeanette Epping Family Foundation.

The property is listed for sale and is priced at about \$3.93 million. Proceeds from the sale of the property would be used to support charitable causes.

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