

Combined police offices

The Allen County Sheriff's Department desperately needs new headquarters.

The Fort Wayne Police Department's lease expires in 2009 and should not be renewed.

The sheriff's department is in a dilapidated building not worth repairing.

City police are in an old building ill-suited for a modern, technologically savvy department.

Offices for both departments should be downtown, close to the courts, the jail and the prosecutor's office. Yet sheriff's deputies work in a building on the grounds of Byron Health Center, more than seven miles from downtown off congested Lima Road. City police are more than a mile southeast of downtown.

Working together to locate a city-county police headquarters downtown should be a no-brainer. Taxpayers would be best-served – and public safety could well be improved – if city and county officials would work to lease or build together.

Yet county officials – whose repeated missteps in relocating the sheriff's department would be almost comical if not so costly – have previously spurned repeated attempts from city leaders to discuss co-locating.

Fortunately, County Commissioner Nelson Peters said he is open to discussing the broad space needs of both city and county public safety agencies.

In 2001, the county accepted as a gift a former Eckrich processing plant building on Osage Street just west of downtown for the new sheriff's department headquarters, taking it off the property tax rolls. Only later did the county commissioners decide it would be too expensive to remodel and sold it for \$450,000 – a little more than half of its appraised value.

In 2006, the commissioners bought a former bank building on New Haven Avenue for \$350,000 with intentions of putting the department there, but that building has proven to be too small.

Jim Herman, sheriff from 1999 to 2006, insisted the department should be housed away from downtown, allowing officers closer access to the rural areas they serve.

To his credit, Ken Fries, who took office in 2007, is open to a downtown location, and he does not share Herman's objections to co-locating with city police. However, Fries believes taxpayers would best be served if Community Corrections moves to a new building (see accompanying editorial) and his department moves into the relatively new building at Harrison and Superior streets now housing that program.

Fries would serve the rural areas with satellite offices in Hometown, Leo-Cedarville and southeast Allen County.

The sheriff also wants to transfer control of the work-release program he runs on the Byron campus to Community Corrections, the program that supervises people sentenced to home detention and monitoring their location with ankle bracelets.

Work release – which houses prisoners at a minimum security site when they are not working – would fit in well with Community Corrections and is an overdue move. Fries would then transfer the 12 confinement officers who oversee work-release prisoners to beef up staff at the jail.

Fries said he has no philosophical objections to being in the same building as city police; he simply believes that his proposal would be the most cost million earmarked to renovate the New Haven Avenue effective, saving the \$1.5 building. “It all comes down to dollars and cents,” Fries said.

The city police alone would not fit into the Community Corrections building, so co-locating there is not an option.

Fries’ concern about the financial implications is admirable, and his plan million to expand the former would be a better use of money than spending \$1.5 bank building. But the county commissioners and sheriff should work with city officials to research the costs involved with the co-location option, including long-term – as well as immediate – savings. City and county police could share technological resources and record-keeping. Just by being in the same building, communications between officers in the two departments would improve.

Plus, a new building for Community Corrections is far from certain, meaning the county should develop other options.

City police and the county sheriff face similar building-related issues. Working together to solve them simply makes sense.

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