

Gardiner City Hall Space Study

October 2006

OVERVIEW

During the summer of 2006, Smith Reuter Lull Architects undertook a study of facilities at the City Hall site, with the intent of giving some clarity to the answers to the following questions:

- What are the space needs of the departments now located on the site?
- Can the site support the space needs of the departments now located on site?
- If the site cannot support all existing departments, which departments should remain?
- Is use of the site for city services its highest and best use?

Prior to beginning the study, a space needs questionnaire was sent to all department heads. These were used as a guideline for on-site interviews with the department heads and the city manager. Copies of the questionnaire and responses will be included under exhibits. Each of the existing areas was visited at least once with the department heads.

Questionnaires, interview notes and existing plans were used to develop a conceptual facility space program. This program was intended to serve as a rough gauge of the scope of need for departments. A working space program would need additional input and discussions with department heads, and final review and acceptance by the manager and city council. A copy of the draft space program will be included under exhibits.

In general, we found all departments occupying approximately the same areas that were originally constructed in 1968. Each department has made changes to their areas within the present space constraints with varying degrees of success. The department heads should all be praised for doing what they could with limited resources.

GENERAL FINDINGS BY DEPARTMENT

Parks and Recreation Department

Parks and Recreation utilizes the last truck bay of the garage area for storage of equipment, mostly power mowers and trimmers. There are also some lockers for remote storage of City records in this area.

Fire Department

The Fire Chief has done a good job making improvements within his facilities, but the real impediment to improvement is a general lack of space. The truck bays are full now, and would not hold the next generation of larger equipment. Storage and maintenance facilities within the bays are minimal. It is difficult to isolate possible contamination from rescue vehicles and equipment in the existing bays. The training room has been subdivided from its initial design to include an office, radio room, firemen's lounge area, in addition to its training and dining functions. There is only one bunk area, which does not accommodate differences in employee sleeping patterns, separation for female employees and changing staffing patterns. The bathroom facilities are largely unchanged from those constructed in 1968, and there are no separate facilities for females. The kitchen should be changed from its present residential layout to a more commercial grade facility. The present office is not adequate for the Chief and his staff, and control of public access into the facility is not adequate.

The Fire Department has a major impact on site use. The parking lot layout is structured to provide adequate space in front of the truck bays to maneuver trucks. This is both inefficient for city parking, and difficult for the fire department. There is also no area on site for training or parking vehicles outside the bays.

Police Department

The two major issues within the Police Department are lack of space and the inability to separate public traffic from police business traffic.

Under the current space arrangement, the public access to the Police Department shares a lobby with the Fire Department and City Hall. Public access to both the Police Chief's office and the Fire Chief's office is through this same lobby, as well as access to the Fire Department. This is also the same lobby through which prisoners enter and leave the Police Department. Corridors within the department are narrow; with some having projections that hinder the movement of prisoners. There is no proper sequence of spaces for booking, holding and interrogation. There is no secure storage for evidence. The locker room is a converted holding cell, and there is no separate facility for female officers. There is one toilet room that is shared by staff and prisoners.

There is no secure parking space for impounded vehicles or officer's cars. Vandalism to officer's cars has occurred in the past as a result of this lack of security. There is no "sallyport" for the safe transport of prisoners or the discrete movement of citizens on police business.

City Hall

The most telling aspect of space needs at the City Hall is the number of rooms that have been sub-divided to accommodate changing staff needs over the years. Spaces that once housed one person might hold two or more. Space has been taken from the Manager's office to provide a workroom. The Council Chamber has been reduced in size for a corridor that connects to the rear corridor, and provides required exiting from the front hall. An office has been created within the Council Chambers using moveable office partitions.

All circulation between City Hall departments takes place through the public corridors, which limits staffing flexibility. The secure vault is located in the Code Enforcement area, across the hall from the Clerks, who use it most. The main corridor is narrow, and the public areas within the departments are very small. This leads to congestion during busy periods. It also hinders the use of the Council Chambers for other activities, such as voting, because of the negative impact the additional foot traffic has on other city functions.

The City Hall occupies the most prominent part of the site, visible from Water Street looking up Church Street. There is a long history of City Hall structures located in this approximate location in downtown Gardiner. There appears to be adequate parking located just in front of the main entrance for typical short-term needs necessary for convenient public access to City Hall.

OPINIONS

General Observations

Based upon the limited scope of this study, the information gathered and our experience in this type of planning, Smith Reuter Lull endeavored to provide guidance to the Council to begin to develop a logical, long range plan for improvements to City facilities. As we developed various approaches and opinions, we met with the Manager, City Services Director and Department Heads to review the concepts and receive feedback. These formed the basis of a presentation made to the full Council in September 20, 2006.

Site Issues

The site is a key piece of downtown Gardiner property. Not only does it provide space for the City services already mentioned, it also shares space with parking and drive-up facilities for two banks, the Gardiner Library and its parking, and general business parking available for that not being used by City Departments and related parking needs. It is easy to see that additional downtown parking would be necessary for the continued viability of downtown businesses, and a more dense system of parking on the site would be beneficial. For that to happen, some of the existing City services now located on site would have to relocate. This is also a reasonable assumption since all City Services now on site need additional space to meet program needs.

Fire Department

Given its impact on the present site, and its need for additional physical space, both built and site, it is logical to conclude that the Fire Department should relocate to a new facility off site. There are many questions to be answered before a long-range plan for the Fire Department could be completed. Where would the new facility be located? Would there be a satellite sub-station as well as the main station? Would the new facility be part of a Public Safety complex that would include Police facilities as well?

Once the Fire Department has left the site and the old truck bays have been removed, additional surface parking space would be available. Eventually, a multi level parking structure could be constructed in the same location.

Because of the time required to find the long-term solution to Fire Department needs, it was assumed for the purpose of this study that the Fire Department would remain in its present location for the foreseeable future.

Police Department

Complete restructuring of the Police Department space might yield some improvement in layout and security. But as a long-term investment, money spent in that manner would not solve the most pressing needs of the department. If the Fire Department were to relocate, adequate space would become available to provide for long-term Police Department needs on this site. The fundamental question that needs to be answered regarding Police facilities is where to locate the facilities. Does the department become part of a Public Safety facility, become a separate facility elsewhere, or continue to be closely associated with City Hall?

City Hall

The City Hall suffers from a shortage of space and a layout of department areas that limit the ability of staff to improve the efficiency with which services are provided to citizens. Only a complete re-structuring of the interior layout of City Hall, combined with an increase in the amount of space, can transform the City Hall into an efficient, pleasant place to work and conduct business, with enough flexibility of layout to serve multiple city needs well simultaneously.

In order for City Hall to remain in its present location, additional space must become available. This can be from relocation of other services already in the building, adding space to the building, or a combination of both approaches.

During our survey we found that there is a universal dislike for the visual appearance of the City Hall building. At the time of its construction, the pre-cast concrete structure used to form the buildings and give it its distinctive “gull-wing” profile was thought to be modern and progressive. But from the beginning it never seemed to fit in, and it continues to present a jarring contrast with the 19th century brick and granite buildings that fill downtown Gardiner.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SEQUENCE

Fire Department

Because of the lengthy time frame necessary to complete the task of providing new Fire Department facilities, including a public information campaign, budgeting and construction, it is our recommendation that the following work be started in the near future.

- Begin a detailed study of department needs to generate a building program
- Identify potential building site or sites
- Develop conceptual budgets and time lines to be included in CIP budgets.

Police Department

Because the Police Department has the least workable facilities, it is our recommendation that temporary facilities be obtained for the department in another location immediately. Because of the sub-standard nature of the existing space, it is assumed that office space more suited to the departments needs will be available to lease somewhere in Gardiner.

- Begin a detailed study of department needs to generate a building program.
- Determine whether to include Police facilities in a more comprehensive Public Safety facility, a separate facility, or as part of the City Hall complex.

By relocating the department temporarily, there will be time to study the best long-term solution for the department. Once the Police Department has left the City Hall, their space can be used to for both Fire Department and City Hall space needs.

In the future, if it is determined that the Police Department should be part of the City Hall building on the present site, part of the space vacated by the Fire Department could be converted for Police Department use.

City Hall

Is the City Hall on this site the “highest and best use” of this property? That is a question that should be considered before any final decision is made. In our opinion, the City Hall on this site would be an easy case to make. There is a long tradition of having the City Hall in this approximate location, in the traditional heart of the commercial and cultural center of town. Even as Gardiner continues to expand west towards the interstate, we believe the concentration of 19th century buildings along the banks of the Kennebec River will remain the “center” of town in the eyes of Gardiner citizens.

Our focus, in this study, was to determine whether the existing building could be renovated adequately to provide the functional facilities required in a modern city hall, and an exterior appearance that make Gardiner City Hall a welcome part of the existing built environment.

We would approach renovation of the interior City Hall spaces as a phased project, meaning that city hall would continue to function from this location while parts of the interior were changed. By relocating functions into renovated spaces, other spaces could in turn be renovated until all areas were completed. In order to proceed in this manner, enough additional space would need to

be available initially to begin the renovation and relocation process. This additional space would be created in two ways. By relocating the Police Department off site existing space is made available. And by constructing new exterior walls at the edge of the existing twelve-foot long roof overhangs, new space could be created around the perimeter of the entire building. These two moves would create enough space to allow approximately one-half of the building to be renovated at a time. In addition, the City Hall could continue to operate on the site during the renovation process, and the new layout of spaces could reflect the more efficient re-organization of functions that the City requires.

The new exterior wall system would also allow the exterior appearance to be changed to be more compatible look with downtown. The existing concrete structural system, so incompatible with the surrounding brick structures, could be exposed on the new, renovated interior to add dramatic effect to the larger spaces such as the Council Chambers, entrance hall and main services hall.

Over time, as the Fire Department relocates off site to new quarters, the vacated space could be used to expand city services around the Main Service Hall, or it could become the new home for the Police Department. The unused portions of the old Fire Department facilities could be demolished and the site parking improved with a parking structure that could provide long term parking for City Hall staff, library staff, downtown employees and citizens accessing shops, restaurants, cultural events and meetings. The parking would become virtually invisible, tucked in behind the Water Street buildings, and the renovated City Hall complex.

IMMEDIATE ACTION

- Begin a search for temporary space for the Police Department.
- Begin to develop a long-range plan for the Fire Department.
- Develop a long-range plan for the existing City Hall site to answer the question about “highest and best use”.