



Staff Report

Date: March 11, 2021

To: Mayor McMillan and Council Members

From: Joe Chinn, Town Manager

Subject: Town Council Decision on which Town Facilities (Police, Fire, Paramedic, Administrative) to Include in a Master Plan to Modernize Within Ross

Recommendation

Town Council to discuss and decide on which Town facilities to include in the Facilities Master Plan to modernize and reconstruct within Ross. The alternative options of facilities to include in the Master Plan to reconstruct for Council to choose from include:

- Alternative A – Rebuild police, paramedic, and administrative space with fire services being relocated to a neighboring station outside of Ross;
- Alternative B – Rebuild police and administrative space with fire services and paramedic services being relocated to a neighboring station outside of Ross;
- Alternative C – Rebuild the fire station, police, paramedic, and administrative space all in Ross; and
- Alternative D – Different mix of facilities than above alternatives to be built in Ross.

Background and discussion

The police station and the fire station, with the exception of the two fire engine bays, are physically and functionally obsolete with significant structural deficiencies. Both were built in 1927, long before the 1986 Essential Service Act (ESA), which established requirements for public safety building construction. Public safety personnel generally consider the Ross police and fire stations to be in among the worst physical and functional condition of any stations in Marin County.

Modern fire and paramedic (EMS) facilities are designed to create travel paths for personnel from living spaces to apparatus bays, ensuring faster response times. Since 2005, firefighters have been sleeping in a portable not connected to the building. Other living spaces and dorms are distant from firetrucks and ambulances. A portion of the fire station was permanently closed a few years ago due to building conditions.

The portion of the building with police facilities was originally constructed as a residence and later converted to the police station; the floor plan does not begin to meet the standards for a modern police facility, and its conditions have been deteriorating for decades. In addition to the police station, fire station and paramedic facilities, the Town is considering constructing space to house administrative staff, a majority of who are located in a portable building behind Town Hall.

In February of 2016 and again in June 2020, Construction and Development Solutions Inc. (CDS) conducted a Property Condition Assessment of the property. The CDS assessment found that there are a number of building systems and components with a diminished level of integrity and capacity. This is due to exceeding limits on their life expectancy, in addition to non-compliance with the Essential Service Act (ESA) requirements for public safety construction. Given the issues related to non-compliance with ESA due to the building's current use as a public safety structure, CDS's findings indicate that it would be cost prohibitive to correct the issues related to the non-compliance of the ESA due to seismic and flooding issues. Given the deficiencies found, the cost of re-construction within the existing building footprint could easily equal or exceed that of a new ground up facility. This finding is similar to what the Council was told around 2010 by Mack5, a construction management firm: that the cost of remodeling the building was more than the cost of constructing a new facility. In addition, if the existing building were to be completely remodeled and rehabilitated to meet ESA and current building standards, there are still significant physical site constraints and building footprint issues that make this option cost prohibitive such as the flood risk, poor building layout and design, and site traffic circulation problems.

The Town of Ross held public meetings on August 13 and October 29, 2020, and January 14, 2021, to discuss the longstanding need to improve town facilities for fire, police, paramedics, and administrative staff. The Town Council August 13, 2020 meeting discussion of modernizing the Town facilities included a summary of the various studies conducted to that date: the CDS Assessment; the Citygate Associates comprehensive Standards of Coverage assessment which provides the foundation for analyzing and planning for fire and paramedic services; and McGrath Architects conceptual site plans and cost estimates for four options. In addition, the staff report and presentation among other items included additional information on fire and paramedic operational considerations, and facility funding and potential funding sources (staff report included as Attachment 1).

On October 29, 2020, the Town held a community workshop using Zoom related to the Town facilities and services that was facilitated by MIG consultants. Approximately 44 members of the public attended the interactive public workshop. The participants provided their thoughts and questions related to Town facilities and services (Attachment 2 Community Workshop Summary). Based on the questions heard at the community workshop and other comments received by the public, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document was created to answer the most common questions heard (Attachment 4).

The Town has created a website link for the Modernizing Ross Town Facilities project (link - <http://www.townofross.org/civiccenter>) containing links to each of the three studies referred to above, all the attachments in this document, videos of the October 29 Workshop, a video of the police and fire stations, as well as other links to additional information on this project.

Community Questionnaire and Results

The Town conducted an online questionnaire in December 2020 to collect input from residents and stakeholders on public safety services and for the replacement of police, fire, paramedic, and administrative facilities in Ross. The Town promoted the questionnaire by multiple email blasts and a postcard sent to every property address in Ross.

Three hundred thirty-six (336) stakeholders completed the questionnaire between December 3 and December 30, 2020. The instrument was hosted on SurveyMonkey and included 11 closed- and open-ended questions. Questionnaire participants were most concerned about medical emergency response, police remaining in the community, and fire and wildfire safety. In a question that asked participants to prioritize among public safety needs: the top response was medical emergency response; followed by police in the community; then local structure and neighborhood fire response which was followed closely by regional wildfire prevention and response; next flooding prevention, preparedness and response; and lastly Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) preparedness.

The questionnaire tested the public support for two of the four options that were included in the August 13 staff report. The two options tested were:

- For about \$14.6 million, the Town can rebuild police, paramedic quarters, and administrative space with fire services being provided from a neighboring station.
- For about \$28.4 million, the Town can rebuild the fire station, police, paramedic quarters, and administrative space.

Related to the \$14.6 million option above:

Are you willing to pay a tax of approximately \$189 per year per \$1 million of property assessed value (for example, \$490/year for the average property assessed at \$2.6 million) to replace police, paramedic, and administrative facilities (the lower cost option)?

Most respondents (63%) indicated they are willing to pay a tax of approximately \$189 per year per \$1 million of property assessed value to replace police, paramedic, and administrative facilities, or the lower cost option. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of respondents replied “no” and 9% responded “I don’t know.”

Related to the \$28.4 million option above:

Are you willing to pay a tax of approximately \$520/year per \$1 million of property assessed value (for example, \$1,350/year for the average property assessed at \$2.6 million) to keep a fire engine in Ross and maintain current response times, in addition to replacing police, paramedic, and administration facilities (the higher cost options)?

Most respondents (55%) indicated they are not willing to pay a tax of approximately \$520 per year per \$1 million of property assessed value to keep a fire engine in Ross and maintain current response times, in addition to replacing police, paramedic, and administration facilities.

The Community Questionnaire Summary is included in Attachment 3.

There were four optional open-ended questions in the survey that asked participants to provide a reason for how they responded to the tax questions as well as a more general area to share comments. The main themes of the responses to the open-ended questions are included in the summary. Some of the comments included desire for information on items such as impacts to public safety and wildfire safety, projected costs, rehabilitation versus rebuilding, and alternative options. Many of the items requested were already included in the FAQ sheet as well as the past staff report. Staff did update the FAQ sheet with some additional items to address some of the additional information requests included in the comments. Staff has been and will continue to be available to answer resident questions or provide additional information that is requested. Townwide emails and Town Morning After newsletter articles have frequently mentioned that if residents have questions or comments to contact Town Manager Chinn or Planning and Building Director Streeter which a number of community residents have done over time.

At the January 14, 2021 Council meeting, the results of the community questionnaire were presented along with a discussion of responses to the most common questions asked by residents. At the meeting there was a discussion that some Town residents were interested to see if private fundraising could fund the additional cost of a fire station. It was recommended by the Council to bring the modernizing facilities item to the March 11 Council meeting to provide the private fundraisers some time to explore the viability of fundraising for the fire facility cost, receive more feedback from the community, and have Council make a decision on the facilities to reconstruct. The private fundraising efforts did not yield enough interest within the community to be able to raise most or all of the approximately \$14 million to construct the fire facility along with the other facilities.

Fiscal, resource and timeline impacts

The rough draft facility cost figures were provided by Mary McGrath Architects based on their experience with design and construction of public safety and other governmental facilities in the Bay Area. Many of the expense estimates are very preliminary and are anticipated to change as scopes and designs move forward on the respective projects. Figures will be updated as better information becomes known. Potential funding sources will be dependent on the facilities the Town decides to rebuild with the cost range being from \$12.2 million to \$28.4 million.

The Town has been actively saving funds to assist in funding a portion of the facility costs and anticipates that it will have approximately \$7 million available to contribute to the facilities. The remainder of the costs would likely need to come from property owners through some form of voter-approved financing, paid over 30 years via property tax bills. The questionnaire tested

resident support for a new tax based on two options with project costs of \$14.6 million and \$28.4 million, respectively.

If the Town decides not to construct a new fire station in Ross, the higher cost project of \$28.4 million will be reduced by \$13.8 million to \$14.6 million. In addition, if the fire station is not constructed in Ross, it is likely the Town will also have lower annual operational costs for fire services. However, the exact amount cannot be determined until after negotiations with the other members of the Ross Valley Fire Department and adjacent fire agencies.

Timing and Process

Following the Council decision on what facilities to reconstruct, the Town will hire a Master Plan consultant to move the project forward, further developing the concept and design of the site facilities. There will be significant public participation opportunities as part of the Master Plan design process. Environmental analysis, which could include preparation of an initial study, public scoping meetings, and development of an Environmental Impact Report will run concurrently with development of the Facilities Master Plan through 2021. A vote on a potential ballot measure for funding would likely occur after certification of the environmental review and Council approval of the Facilities Master Plan. Staff time and consultant costs associated with this project will be funded from the Town's Facilities Fund.

Depending on the option selected by the Town Council of what facilities to construct, other negotiations and agreements with other entities may be needed. For example, if the Council elects not to re-construct the fire station in Ross then the RVFD JPA would have to be re-negotiated with all four partners of the JPA – San Anselmo, Fairfax, Ross, and Sleepy Hollow. In addition, there could be impacts to related existing labor contracts with RVFD firefighters. Additionally, an agreement may be needed with the Kentfield Fire Protection District for any services they provide. In addition, a new lease agreement would be needed with the Ross Valley Paramedic Authority if they stay on-site.

Environmental review (if applicable)

Council's consideration of this report is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Once the Facilities Master Plan project is scoped and defined, the appropriate level of environmental review will be determined.

Alternative actions

Alternatives are being discussed throughout this process.

Attachments

1. August 13, 2020 Staff Report
2. October 29, 2020 Community Workshop Summary
3. January 14, 2021 Staff Report with Community Questionnaire Summary Attachment
4. Town Facilities Modernization Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Responses
5. Public Comment since January 14, 2021 Council Meeting