

# New Town Hall plans reduced to save money

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**Chair hopes it's open by Nov. 2016**

By:

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Renderings courtesy Cuningham Group. An aerial view of the new site plan, with the maintenance building on the left and Town Hall on the right.



The plan that was presented to the public Feb. 23, with the maintenance building in a different location and much more parking.

Town of Verona Chair Mark Geller hopes a new town hall will be open in time for the 2016 presidential election. It's an aggressive timeline, he acknowledged, but with the plans nearly finalized and almost ready to put out for bids, he is hopeful it can be done.

"It's (an end date) that we've talked about all along," he said.

The initial plans for a new Town Hall on Hwy. PD were met with a mix of excitement and skepticism when presented to town residents in February. Town officials and consultants – donated by Epic – have worked to reduce the size and cost of the building by shrinking the maintenance and office storage areas. Still, officials hope the new facilities will provide enough space for town business and give the town its own identity.

The new plan was presented to the town board July 29, and brings the buildings to 12,893 square feet, and officials hope to start construction sometime this fall.

"We saw (the projected costs) and said, 'The grand total is more than we can spend,'" Geller told the Press of the changes. "It kind of came down to applying basic math."

### **Seeking authorization**

The new plans call for the Town Hall and maintenance garage to be on either 5.2 or 6.2 acres of land. The town would sell the rest of the 43 acres it purchased in December to help pay for the construction.

"It's all tied to being able to sell some land to pay for this," Geller said.

Town residents will have the chance to authorize that action at a meeting at 7 p.m. Sept. 15. When electors originally approved a new town hall, they gave the go ahead on the building, but the motion did not include anything about the cost.

Geller said town officials want to be sure the money is authorized to go toward the construction.

The board decided after a closed session Wednesday to get an appraisal on the site. Town administrator Amanda Arnold said she was working to find a "good person" to work with for that process, and didn't have an exact timeline, though she added, "In the near future we're going to move forward" with a sale.

The town expects to put out the plans for bids for construction soon, and Geller hopes the cost can be kept as close to \$2 million as possible.

"If we can't make the numbers work, then it's not going to get built," Geller said, noting he hopes the project has a "very minimal" impact on taxes.

### **Smaller footprint**

In the last five months, the town and its consultants have removed nearly 3,000 square feet from the two building plans.

"We've really, really worked hard at just screwing it down really tight," Geller said.

That was done to pre-empt a high cost in a market in which "everything is by the square foot," he added. The biggest space-saving came in the maintenance garage, where the original plans called for diagonal parking and a through lane to allow vehicles to leave and enter the garage. Eliminating that lane and allowing each town vehicle to have its own garage door to enter and exit cut more than 500 square feet.

The new plans removed 1,880 square feet from the maintenance building in total. While Geller had some worries about a lack of space for any new vehicles, he said they had to make a decision based on likely cost.

Planners cut another 1,107 square feet from the Town Hall building, with much of that coming from storage space. The biggest improvements in the hall, Geller said, would be separate office spaces and a conference room for private meetings or town board closed sessions.

The community area, which is larger than the town's current community/board room space, will also be able to be accessed on the weekends without requiring access to the office and administration area.

### **Good neighbor**

Geller said Epic Systems has been a helpful neighbor throughout the Town Hall planning process, offering up its own consultants and building planners to assist the town on Epic's dime.

He said it's nice to see a benefit from the company that has had a big impact on the town's landscape since moving here in 2002.

“They were doing things for the city, they were doing things for the county,” Geller said. “We were just feeling like we were bearing a major brunt of the effect of Epic.”

That help has paid off, both in cost savings for the town and by speeding up the planning process.

“I bet it would’ve taken us two years,” Geller estimated. “And then the amount of money.”

Those savings have kept the price down, and the professional architects from the Cuningham Group working on the design have helped turn it into what Geller hopes will be a monument to the town’s agricultural roots.

In order to pay for the improvements, the town will sell some of the land it purchased in December.

Arnold told the Press she has received “a few” inquiries about the land that will be available to purchase, and Geller said the town wasn’t the only entity to put in an offer on the land originally. Geller said he hopes to have a for sale sign up soon.

### **Setting it apart**

Geller said an extra benefit of having a new town hall is to give the Town of Verona its own identity apart from the quickly growing municipalities on its borders.

The new location of the town hall would literally set it apart from the city, unlike the current spot on Cross Country Road where it’s surrounded by city land on all sides.

“When people ask me, ‘Where do you live?’ I say, ‘The Town of Verona,’” Geller said. “They just hear, ‘Verona,’ but there is a difference between the city and the town.”

Geller hopes that identity can help attract new people to the town, especially as it works to set up boundary agreements with nearby municipalities.

Ultimately, he said, the town is not going anywhere, and if they don’t build a new town hall, he estimated costs to repair the current one at more than \$1 million anyway.

“When we look at the fact that we’re going to be around awhile, the existing Town Hall just doesn’t make sense to stay there,” he said. “It would’ve been irresponsible not to go for it.”

### **Buy a building**

The town is holding an open house from 8-11 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 22, to give people a chance to see the buildings already on the property in case anyone wants to purchase a building or repurpose any materials. For more information, contact town administrator Amanda Arnold at 845-7187.