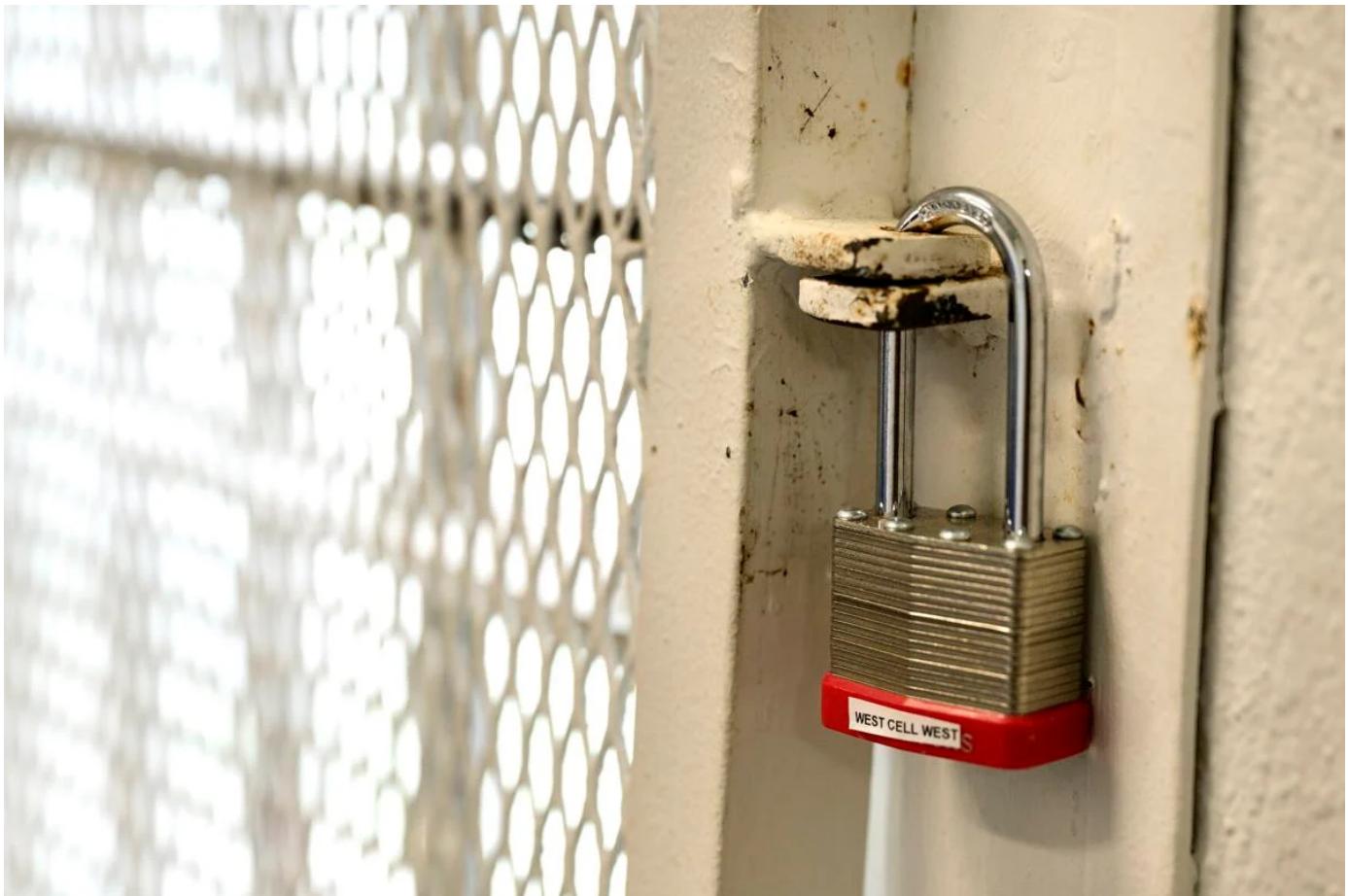


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## Dixon County seeks to replace aging jail, courthouse

**Nick Hytrek**

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A lock secures a security screen covering a window in one of two cells in the Dixon County Jail, located on the third floor of the county courthouse. County leaders are seeking to build a new courthouse and law enforcement center to replace the current courthouse, which was built in 1883 and expanded in 1940.

Tim Hynds, Sioux City Journal

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Nick Hytrek

PONCA, Neb. — It's not unheard of for offenders on their way to the Dixon County Jail to make themselves heard throughout the courthouse.

There's no elevator or back staircase to the sheriff's office and jail on the third floor, so the only way up is the public stairway, the same one courthouse visitors and workers use to access county offices.

"If they want to yell all the way up, they can yell all the way up. It's caused disruptions," Dixon County Sheriff Tom Decker said of unruly folks on their way to jail.

Or try lugging someone too drunk to walk up three flights of stairs, a task sheriff's deputies occasionally must tackle. It's a situation that raises safety issues for deputies, the offender and the public.



Dixon County Sheriff Tom Decker stands in an area that doubles as the county's 911 communications center and jail booking area. The jail, built in 1940, is outdated and does not meet modern jail standards. County leaders are considering plans to build a new law enforcement center and courthouse to replace the current building, which was built in 1883.

Tim Hynds, Sioux City Journal

"Our biggest concern right now is if something happens, the county could get sued," said Matt Michl, chairman of the Dixon County Courthouse and Jail Committee.

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After months of study, the committee, a group of more than a dozen county residents and elected officials formed to address the needs of an aging courthouse and jail, has determined the best solution is to replace the county's facilities with a new courthouse and law enforcement center. They've proposed moving from the site the original section of the courthouse has occupied in Ponca since 1883 to a

5-acre plot to the southeast side of town along Nebraska Highway 12 and adjacent to a county annex building.

Committee members said the historic 140-year-old, two-story courthouse and its three-story addition built in 1940 have outlived their usefulness. Lack of storage space, a leaky and moldy basement, poor ventilation and noncompliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act add up to an inadequate working environment that's also hard for some visitors to navigate because the building has no elevator.

"It's just not a good situation. The building has done its time. It's served its purpose," Michl said. "It's not a matter of if we need it. We need it."



County leaders say the Dixon County Courthouse is outdated and has outlived its useful life as an office building and jail. The section on the left was built in 1883, and the section on the right, which houses the jail on the third floor, was built in 1940. County leaders expect to ask for voter approval to build a new courthouse and law enforcement center.

Tim Hynds, Sioux City Journal

Cost of the new county government complex is an estimated \$14 million-\$20 million. A bond issue likely will go before Dixon County voters in 2024.

Before then, architects will develop conceptual designs for the courthouse and jail, and the county is negotiating with the landowner for purchase of the desired site, which was chosen from among at least nine other options.

A courthouse, jail and sheriff's office needs assessment completed in late 2021 by an architecture and engineering firm provided a comprehensive look at the courthouse. Among the findings, county offices have little to no storage space left. Court hearings sometimes must be moved to the first floor because the second-floor courtroom isn't accessible by wheelchair. Near-constant water in the

basement has led to concerns about the building's foundation and mold, a problem the county continues to mitigate.

In short, the courthouse and many of its systems are outdated, and bringing the building up to modern standards would cost millions of dollars.

Lisa Lunz, chairwoman of the county's board of supervisors and a courthouse committee member, said adding an elevator alone would be a challenge because of a 4-foot height difference between the second floors of the original building and the addition.

"By the time you spend that much money on something, you still have an old building with problems," Lunz said.



Dixon County Sheriff Tom Decker points to cracked walls in the county jail's west cell while talking about crowded, aging space in the sheriff's office and county jail in Ponca, Nebraska. The county is seeking to build a new courthouse and law enforcement center.

Tim Hynds, Sioux City Journal

Nowhere is that more evident than the sheriff's office and jail, which doesn't meet modern jail standards but is grandfathered in under those in place when the jail was built decades ago.

"We're just pretty much out of space," said Decker, a 25-year veteran of the department who was appointed sheriff last year. "We do what we have to to the best of our ability."

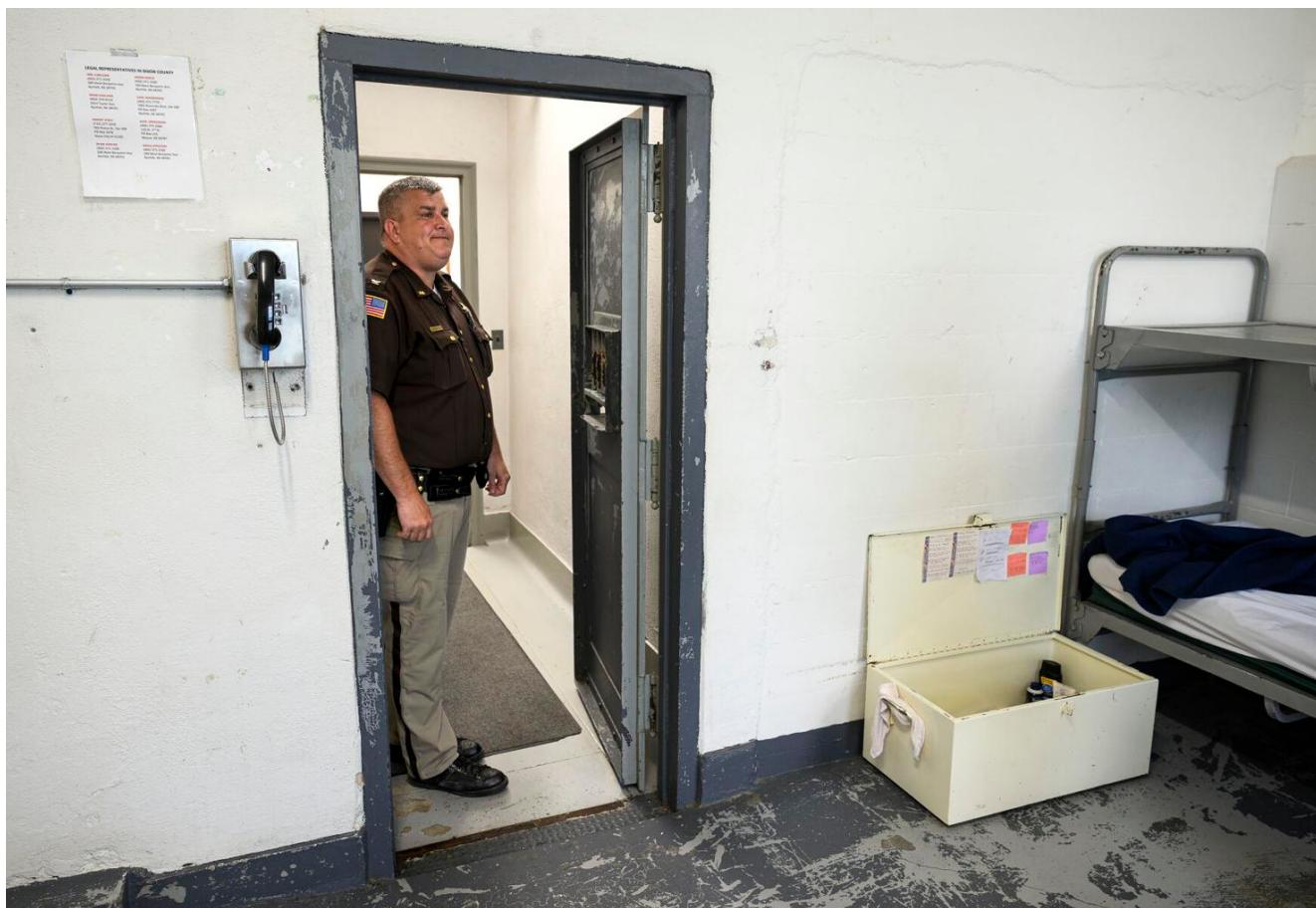
The jail's capacity is listed as 12 inmates, but its design is not amenable to running at full capacity. The jail has two cells -- eight beds in one and four in the other. With only two cells, it's hard to isolate inmates if necessary. If a prisoner is

uncooperative or disruptive, he must be held separately, occupying one of the two cells. Decker said he often opts to house problem inmates in another county with a jail that can accommodate them. Female inmates are housed outside Dixon County because it's hard to keep them separate from the men and because of a lack of enough female jail staff members to supervise them.

Decker said the county spends approximately \$20,000 annually to house inmates in other counties, and transporting them to and from Ponca for court appearances takes deputies away from patrol or emergency response duties.

The rest of the jail area is overcrowded. The booking area shares space with the county's 911 communications center, where employees double as dispatchers and corrections workers. While being booked, a belligerent offender could leap across the counter at the dispatchers or easily knock computer equipment onto the floor. If a 911 call comes in, the worker must stop the booking process to answer the call.

"It's probably more of a safety concern for the dispatchers and jailers," Decker said.



Dixon County Sheriff Tom Decker stands at the door to one of two dormitory-style jail cells at the county jail in the Dixon County Courthouse in Ponca, Nebraska. County leaders are seeking to build a new courthouse and jail to replace county buildings built in 1883 and 1940.

Tim Hynds, Sioux City Journal

One room off to the side of the booking area serves as the library, exercise room, meeting room and visitation room, making it hard to accommodate more than one inmate speaking with his lawyer or family members at a time. Inmates change out of their clothes and into jail jumpsuits in the same area that houses kitchen and laundry facilities.

Though the design is not finalized, a new jail with 14 beds spread over 10 cells and four temporary/holding cells is being planned. Such a design, Decker said, would enable him to safely house minimum- to maximum-security and special needs inmates and women, if he has enough female staff, thus eliminating much of the cost of housing inmates in other counties.

"It would give us room to grow," Decker said.



Farmland adjacent to the current Dixon County annex building along Nebraska Highway 12 on the southeast side of Ponca, Nebraska, is the preferred site for a proposed new courthouse and law enforcement center.

Tim Hynds, Sioux City Journal

A modern jail would have a private entrance, increasing security and safety for sheriff's staff and the public. Decker said recommendations from the state jail standards commission will determine if he'd need to hire additional staff.

Once plans are finalized, county leaders anticipate conducting a series of town hall meetings and open houses to educate voters about the current building, construction plans and tax implications. The county has already hosted some open houses, which can be an eye-opening experience for visitors, said Michl, who got a top-to-bottom look at the building when he joined the courthouse committee.

"I wasn't appalled, but I was really surprised with how bad it was," he said.

Ultimately, Lunz said, the issue likely will come down to how much a new courthouse and jail will cost, and voters must decide if it's worth the tax increase.

"People I have talked to feel that the courthouse has served its purpose and it's time for Dixon County to have a new facility," Lunz said. "It's past its useful life."