

**POLICE BUILDING PROJECT**  
**Blue Ribbon Task Force**  
**Problem Statement**  
March 15, 2006

The job of the BRTF is to represent the interests of Palo Alto's citizens, police, and City staff by reviewing—with emphasis on preserving public safety and safeguarding justice—the case for a new or renovated Police Department building and advising the City Council on its size, character, location, cost, and financing. This paper deals with the first of those elements.

**I. The Case for a New or Renovated Building**

**Summary:**

The current facility is severely overcrowded and inadequate, placing at risk the safety of officers and staff, security of evidence, safety of equipment, and relationships with the community. Emergency preparedness, response, and recovery capacity in the face of an environmental or other disaster cannot be assured in the current facility. Employee morale and operational efficiency are compromised. The PAPD lags several neighboring communities in regard to working conditions, operational capacity, and the message the building conveys to the candidate pool for recruiting officers. Finally, the building's inadequacies send a negative signal to citizens regarding the place of the Police Department in the life, security, and good order of the community.

**Information and Analysis:**

The Palo Alto Police Department facility at 275 Forest Avenue was designed nearly forty years ago (1967) as part of the City Center complex. At 19,000 useable square feet (25,000 total including hallways, stairwells, restrooms, etc.), it is roughly half the size of police or public safety buildings in the several comparable communities we visited. Since the PAPD first occupied the building in 1970, a number of things have changed, among them:

- ❑ New or newly recognized types of criminal activity, most notably computer fraud and identity theft, where Palo Alto exceeds surrounding communities and national averages; sexual predators using the Internet; elder abuse; and terrorism.
- ❑ New law enforcement obligations including introduction of DNA evidence requiring special facilities and equipment to secure it; longer periods in which evidence must be retained in a secure manner; a timed parking system in the downtown area (requiring a staff of seven officers and vehicles); and additional paperwork.
- ❑ New health and safety regulations pertaining to such things as fume hoods for working with chemicals, special air circulation systems (where pathogens may be associated with evidence), and secure facilities related to terrorism threats

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(such as secure mailrooms in case biological agents are introduced into the building through a mailed package).

- ❑ The upgrading of building codes, including earthquake codes, leaving the current building deficient in key respects. As determined by a consultant in the early 1990s, it is highly uncertain whether the current building, which includes the 911 dispatch center and emergency operations center, would be functional in the event of a natural or other disaster.
- ❑ The size of the City has grown by 10 percent. The resident population was 56,040 in 1970, and is approximately 61,700 now. The daytime population of the City, a statistic of relevance when calculating the need for police protection, traffic monitoring, and related matters, is another 47,000 in 2006. (Data not available for 1970.)
- ❑ The overall size of the Palo Alto Police Department has increased 28% since the current facility was built. The authorized staffing levels of the Police Department (including the Dispatch Center) grew from 119 in 1969-70 to 152.5 in 2006-07. Sworn staffing levels increased from 88 to 93 while civilian staffing increased from 31 to 59.5. In addition, the Department now includes more than 40 volunteers compared to none in 1969-70.

We surveyed 2004 crime statistics in order to compare relative law enforcement activity. (Data are available on the Web from “Area Connect” and are based on 2004 FBI crime statistics.) We looked at the data for eight nearby communities: Cupertino, East Palo Alto, Fremont, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Redwood City, Santa Clara, and San Jose. The crime categories were murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny theft, and auto theft. The data were normalized per 100,000 population. To keep the data from becoming distorted by unusually high numbers, we excluded the largest value in each crime category before calculating averages. The results were as follows: In two categories, Palo Alto was considerably above average, at 125 percent of average for murder and 140 percent of average for larceny theft (computer crime, fraud, identity theft, etc.). For two categories, Palo Alto was considerably below average, at one-third the average for aggravated assault and two-thirds the average for auto theft. For the remaining three categories, Palo Alto numbers were within 13 percent of the average, twice on the low side (forcible rape and robbery), once on the high side (burglary). Data such as these have multiple explanations, and we are not attempting to draw any conclusions from them, save one: that the PAPD is, on average, equivalently stressed by criminal activity as are neighboring cities and needs to be as well equipped and prepared as they to prevent and fight crime.

Since 1970, the scope of PAPD responsibilities has increased. The substantial growth in Palo Alto as a destination (for people visiting Stanford, the Stanford Shopping Center, neighborhood commercial centers, restaurants, and businesses) has brought more traffic, parking issues, and other activity obliging increased patrols and responses to calls requesting or requiring a police response. Restaurants in and around University Avenue

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tend to generate alcohol related police activity. Homelessness is likewise a relatively new phenomenon in the City. Increased commercial activity increases shoplifting arrests. Palo Alto residents expect a high level of service from the PAPD, and calls for service to the police average 146 per day, 365 days per year. This equates to roughly 0.86 police calls for service per year per resident. Comparable numbers are: Redwood City 0.80, Santa Clara 0.58, and Fremont 0.28. These several factors place demands on the Department that in turn put pressure on space, such as hiring and providing space for more officers, acquiring and parking more police vehicles, and the increased record keeping that goes with these rising levels of activity.

When designed, the current building did not include spaces and features that are now considered essential, such as a secure Sallyport (an enclosure in which a prisoner can be taken from a police vehicle into the building safely); reasonably sized and reassuring spaces for victims or witnesses who have been injured, frightened, or otherwise traumatized; access for the disabled; certain high-tech equipment (and appropriate housing for it) used in detective work and in departmental operations; a sufficient number of holding cells to assure safety for officers and enable the separation of juveniles and adults, as required by law; and equivalent locker, shower, and toilet facilities for female officers (there were no female sworn officers in 1970). Sleeping space for officers coming off night duty and scheduled for a court appearances a few hours later is improvised and inadequate. Segregated storage space for firearms seized in evidence does not exist.

After a period of increasing crowding, operational inefficiencies began to grow, such as having to use spaces distant from the facility for police functions, e.g., the Citizens Police Academy; locating units in available space rather than in relation to other units with which they regularly work; jeopardizing evidence if it must be stored in suboptimal locations; placing lockers in hallways, thus depriving those who must use them of privacy; interviewing victims, witnesses, and suspects in cramped and hard-edged spaces; storing records in under-secured spaces; holding conversations or interviews between employees or with the public in lobbies, shared offices, or other open space in general use, thus compromising confidentiality; etc. [Note: the Department maintains some offsite storage space and may in the future; in most cases, this is desirable since it allows use of lower-cost facilities.] When surrounding jurisdictions form task forces to work on outbreaks of related crimes, different police departments must take turns housing such efforts for their duration. Palo Alto has difficulty meeting its obligations; when it can meet them, it is only at the cost of short-changing the regular functions that must be temporarily displaced. When the PAPD hosts meetings of regional associations to which departmental staff belong and in which they may play leadership roles, appropriate space must on occasion be rented because of lack of suitable space in its own building.

Several surrounding communities have, since 1970, built new police or public safety buildings incorporating up-to-date technologies, responding to the changes in legal, building code, and environmental safety requirements, growth in their communities, changes in the nature of criminal activity, and other relevant factors. The Task Force visited four of these facilities built between the late 1970s and 2000 (Mt. View, Fremont,

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Redwood City, and Santa Clara). They range in size from 44,000 to 70,000 square feet. Having new or upgraded facilities advantages these departments in recruitment for new officers and retention of already trained and experienced officers.

Very little has occurred that would diminish space needs, though the future holds more promise for that than the past provided. Compressible shelving can make better use of evidence storage and file storage space (but cannot be retrofitted into the current building); information technology will in the future require less space for storage of records; appropriate remote storage in less costly facilities releases pressure on the main facility; some functions can be outsourced to commercial, county, or regional facilities (though much of this has already been done); etc.

