

CH Public Safety building larger than it looks

story by

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Passersby might easily misjudge the size of the new Columbia Heights Public Safety building, 825 41st Ave. NE. Contractors regraded the site to mitigate the hill to the north, which means the safety center is much longer than its predecessor building, which housed NEI College of Technology and, before that, the old Columbia Heights High School.

The \$11,500,000, 47,000 square foot building has enough room for the city's police and fire departments, with double-deep drive-through bays that will hold the fire department's three fire trucks, three rescue vehicles, and a boat. The two departments have separate kitchens (and living quarters for firefighters) but share an exercise room, men's and women's locker rooms and a training room. The police side has offices, a gun range, evidence lockers and storage and four jail cells.

Heights residents will be able to see the building for themselves at an open house Saturday, Oct. 3, noon to 5 p.m. The event, held during Fire Prevention Month, will include guided tours, refreshments, and a display of safety materials and hand outs for youngsters.

Columbia Heights Police Chief Scott Nadeau called it a building for the future. "For the amount of time we had to lay it out, I think it's very thoughtful. Community groups will be able to use this building. It offers a welcoming environment and it's accessible.

"This is a 50-year building," Nadeau added. "We have included things that were reasonable to project. The top of the building, for instance, has extra footings so a second level could be added."

Many city officials and residents agreed that new public safety quarters were long overdue. A recent city newsletter said "The current facility, adjacent to city hall, is extremely outdated and does not meet the current needs of the busy police and fire departments because it lacks the space required for modern equipment and adequate workspace. In addition, the current facility is not in compliance with accepted standards for issues such as ADA [American Disabilities Act] assisting people with disabilities or the housing of prisoners."

The four jail cells in themselves are an extreme upgrade from the police department's old facility, where cramped conditions meant no cells at all, and police officers had to handcuff waiting prisoners to a bench.

The new building has two elevators and underground parking for police vehicles. Offices have bullet proof glass and walls. The short wall around the roof's perimeter has hooks on the inside, so firefighters can use it to secure ladders and equipment during training.

"A lot of training stuff is built into this building," said assistant fire chief John Larkin. "We used to have to practice laddering in the city's parking garage. We were always trying to come up with ways to accomplish things we needed to practice. We went down to the city's shop, we simulated things in the training room. Here, we'll be able to do things in-house.

"This building's roof has an eighth of an inch metal on the top, so the firefighters will be able to train and put ladders up. The back archway has an open window that we can put plywood in. We can use axes and practice going through windows. We'll be able to set up a room in the basement to practice search and rescue."

A conference room off the front lobby will be available for public meetings, as well as shared between the fire and police departments. Full time firefighters have bedrooms, and extra rooms are



The Columbia Heights Public Safety Building, 825 41st Ave. NE. Above: Columbia Heights Assistant Fire Chief John Larkin, EDS Construction Manager Earl "Doc" Smith, Chief of Police Scott Nadeau. (Photos by Gail Olson)

available for paid on call firefighters.

Outside, a tall black security fence surrounds two employee parking lots in back. Rain gardens and settling ponds will catch rainwater. The building incorporates "green" design, with geothermal heating and cooling and interior lights that turn on and off automatically when people enter and leave rooms. Authorized staff will use security cards to open doors in certain areas of the building. The basement has room to store an impounded vehicle, and the gun range—which has its own air circulation system—has four lanes.

Earl "Doc" Smith, EDS construction manager who oversaw the project, said they began construction Aug. 26, 2008; it took a little over a year to complete. They have been able to save money in several areas around the building, he said, including the furniture. "Because of the way the economy is, we were able to negotiate better prices on new furniture. We also probably saved about \$400,000 by phasing in the earthwork."

The architect, David Olds from Buetow

and Associates, did a good job of utilizing the space, Smith added. "There are also some interesting architectural touches, such as the arches around the windows and doors."

The landscaping cost about \$45,000, Smith said; workers were busy planting trees and shrubs last week.

Larkin said the Public Safety Building will house historic artifacts, including a 100-year old bell, which still works, in the archway at the west end. "It's the bell they used to notify firefighters that there was a call," he said. An old horse drawn hose cart will sit outside, and an antique hand pumper will be housed inside, he added.

The brick patio at the entrance includes a space for the bronze tribute statue, "Always on Guard," portraying a firefighter, a police officer, and a child. The Columbia Heights Activity Fund and the

police and fire departments have been raising money for the two-thirds-size statue, which will cost \$50,000. Larkin said they have raised about \$35,000 so far. For \$1,000, sponsors will receive a plaque on the statue's base, a brick engraved with their name, and a commemorative paperweight replica of the statue; for \$500, they can get their name engraved on a plaque below the statue and an engraved brick at the site; for \$50.00, sponsors can have their name engraved on a brick in the courtyard. Commemorative coins cost \$25. For information on donating, call Mayor Gary Peterson, 612-978-9858, the police department (Erik) at 763-706-3760, or fire department (John) at 763-706-3654.

For information on the Oct. 3 open house, call Fire Chief Gary Gorman, 763-706-3652.