

Bringing an Obsolete Public Building Up-to-Date



By Frederick J. Rast, III, Mayor, Borough of Atlantic Highlands; Adam Hubeny, Borough Administrator, Borough of Atlantic Highlands & Eli Goldstein, The Goldstein Partnership, Architects & Planners

Public buildings often accurately reflect the beliefs, priorities, and aspirations of a people. ...” wrote Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr.

While this quote may be true for new public buildings, it may no longer be so for those that are older and unable to support the delivery of modern municipal services. Many older public buildings and public budgets strain to meet our needs for technology, accessibility and security. They also can come up short in terms of energy-efficiency, the need for equivalent facilities for men and women, and current safety codes. Thus, over decades, many of New Jersey’s public buildings have become obsolete—a far cry from the reflection of our “beliefs, priorities and aspirations.”

We faced this dilemma in the Borough of Atlantic Highlands. Our 50-year-old, two-story municipal building contained our municipal offices, police department, public library, and court. Our municipal offices and library were straining to operate in spaces they outgrew 40 years ago. There was mold in our police department and library. Our court failed to meet Administrative Office of the Court guidelines, and the entire building failed to meet ADA requirements. Needless to say, our employees were frustrated and became outspoken.

When the Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health Program (PEOSHA) cited us for a violation, the problems became impossible to ignore. We knew we needed to take on a major capital project, but the timing could not have been worse. It was 2008, the start of the Great Recession.

IT TAKES COMPLICATED PLANNING TO MAKE A PROCESS SIMPLE.

Reaching Political Consensus Discussions about upgrading the building began under a former Democratic Mayor. I continued to advance them under my Republican Administration with our Governing Body of four Republicans and two Democrats. Our able Borough Administrator and co-author on this article, Adam Hubeny, was an integral part of this process.

The PEOSHA violation meant we had to act for the welfare of our community, and for our employees who were working in substandard conditions. However some members of our Finance Committee needed convincing.

Main Entrance



By working with employees from each of our departments, then considering their requirements as part of a whole, we were able to eliminate inefficiencies, streamline circulation, reduce the need for new construction, and keep costs down.

Municipal Offices



Before



After

In order to reach a consensus, we held public meetings to receive citizen input and to keep everyone fully informed. We also created a resident team that attended bi-weekly meetings for over a year. This comprehensive approach meant all voices were heard. Ultimately, we received support for our Council's courageous and unanimous vote to bond \$6 million for this project. From then on we met every challenge as a team that included two

Council Members, and our Police Chief, Librarian, Court Administrator, Municipal Clerk and an interested resident.

Optimizing Dollars and Space Rehabilitating an existing building can be an economical choice, but we were concerned about disrupting the delivery of our services. Replacing our building also presented challenges, because we needed a building site. Our existing building was in the center of town, a convenient and symbolic location. It

also served as the anchor of our shopping district. We hoped it could stay where it was.

In order to weigh our options, we retained the architectural firm, The Goldstein Partnership. Eli Goldstein, also a co-author of this article, provided the rigorous and comprehensive analysis we needed to inform our discussions and decision-making.

Goldstein helped us see that we could keep all the original functions



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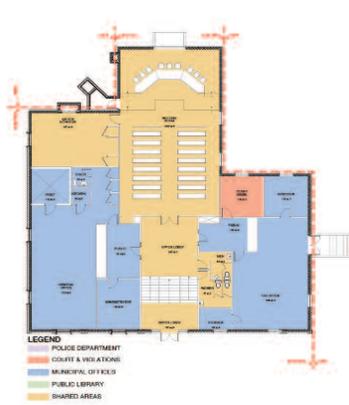
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on the site, but that the Police Department and Library would need more space than the existing building could hold. In studying our existing spaces, he found that each department's needs were individually met but in isolation from the others.

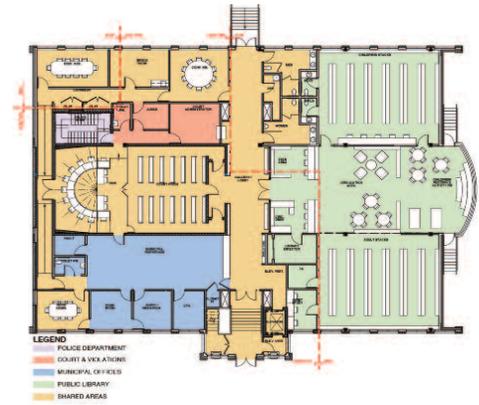
For example, our large conference room was "land-locked" within the Municipal Office suite, making it hard for others to share it. He determined that the size of the project, and its associated costs, could be minimized if we maximized interdepartmental space sharing. He showed us how, by making shared spaces directly accessible from public corridors, we could increase efficiency and reduce costs. While we did need additions in three places, we were able to keep them small.

These days public agencies must satisfy many functional and security requirements. Often the result is a complicated floor plan. By working with employees from each of our departments to determine their requirements, then considering them as part of a whole, Goldstein eliminated inefficiencies, streamlined circulation, and reduced the need for new construction.

Our building and site needed a comprehensive Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) overhaul and AOC (Administrative Office of the Court) guidelines required the Courtroom to have three accessible levels. Just one of the many ways we saved space and dollars



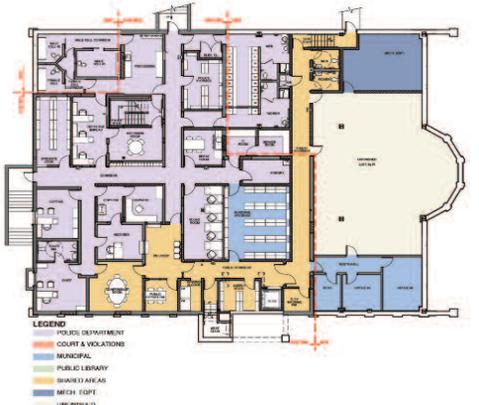
UPPER LEVEL: BEFORE



UPPER LEVEL: AFTER



LOWER LEVEL: BEFORE



LOWER LEVEL: AFTER

was to make required ramps do double-duty as corridors.

Avoiding Service Interruption We knew we could not stop providing services during construction. We con-

sidered temporarily moving to rented trailers but the cost was prohibitive. We had enough space available in a field house to temporarily relocate the library. We did that, but the other departments had to remain in the building.

To minimize the number of construction phases and moves, and associated disruption and costs, we built the additions first. When they were complete, the municipal offices, court, and police department moved into them temporarily, while their original spaces were renovated. After construction, all departments, including our library-in-exile, relocated to their new and improved quarters.

It takes complicated planning to make a process simple. The Goldstein Partnership had to anticipate final construction phasing as they began architectural design. Critical support facilities, such as toilet rooms and stairs, had to be available at all times. However, our existing ones were beyond repair. Mr. Goldstein purposely located new ones in the additions so they'd be available when the original ones were demolished.



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Administrator Adam Hubeny managed to stretch his already busy 24-hour day to include approving daily contractor logistics, coordinating them with our staff, and providing clear and ongoing communication to all—while keeping up everyone's morale.

Funding When we decided to bond this project at \$6 million, the economy was depressed and we expected favorable bids. Still, to hedge our bets, we asked the bidders to price 13 alternates. The bids we received ranged from \$4,193,000 to \$6,182,858. By accepting the lowest reasonable bid, we were able to include all alternates and bring the construction cost in at just under \$5 million. The remaining bond money was used for furnishings, computers and phones, bonding costs, mold remediation, moving the library, and professional fees.

We have also found ways to save on our expenses going forward. The Monmouth County Library System loved our newly renovated library so much that they decided to make it a branch. And in doing so the county assumed the library's administration costs.

Lessons Learned

- Tough financial times can be the right times to make capital investments.
- Limited financial resources can lead to the most efficient solutions.
- If you must maintain building operations during construction, consider construction phasing and implementation planning while making design decisions.
- Find ways to share space to reduce new construction.
- Know that renovations can provide opportunities to upgrade the thermal performance of the building envelope (windows, walls, and roofs). In our case we lowered operating costs by approximately 10 percent, despite an increase in square footage.
- Spend upfront time unifying your team. It will pay dividends throughout the project.
- Renovations can provide an opportunity to share services and to reduce operating costs.

Completing this project required borough staff and residents to work through some challenging issues, but we weathered the storm. Today we have a better organized and more functional Borough Hall. It is designed to serve our community well today and into the future. Coop-

eration and collaboration between our staff, architect, and resident team allowed us to freely discuss ideas, concerns and goals. Per the opening quote from Supreme Court Justice Powell, we now have a building that reflects our borough's priorities and needs. ▲

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