

J'ville police to stay put, for now

Council takes no action; residents want to keep city's community center

By TONY BOOM
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JACKSONVILLE — The police department will stay in the temporary quarters it moved to nearly 15 years ago after the City Council took no action Tuesday on a proposal to relocate the department to the city-owned Sampson House Community Center.

A half-dozen citizens spoke out against the relocation, citing frequent use of the building by senior citizen groups and other organizations. Police Chief David Towe proposed the move, which has been discussed by city officials for several months. No council member made a motion to go forward with the idea after discussion and public testimony.

"Some of the best events in Jacksonville had their founding in the Community Center," said Dirk Siedlecki of the Friends of the Jacksonville Cemetery. "It's part of the community."

A total of 132 meetings have been held at the Sampson House since the beginning of the year, according to resident Larry Smith, who had a log of use. He said additional meetings may have been held but not recorded.

"The Chamber of Commerce has used that building numerous times," said Chamber President Jim Ward.

"You have to think about the people that will be displaced," said Terri Gieg, also of the chamber.

The police department is housed at 180 N. Third St. along with the fire department. The police moved there in 1994 for what was supposed to be an 18-month stay. The facility is crowded and has security issues. The city's insurer also has expressed concerns about evidence security.

"My major concern is over our security for the evidence," said Towe. "If we are challenged in court, we are going to lose on that."

Councilman John Dodero called for the body to make a tough decision to allow the relocation.

"As a City Council, we have to prioritize. Public safety is a pretty high priority," said Dodero. "It seems ... given the situation with the evidence locker and the crowded space for employees, it's irresponsible for the council not to make this decision. Now we have a viable option for the short term."

Councilwoman Donna Schatz said the council should get detailed information on costs involved and explore options for groups that use the Community Center to meet elsewhere

before making a decision. Towe did not have cost estimates, but said he wanted to put as little money as possible into the move.

"I'd suggest we do our homework. I'd be more comfortable with it if we had cost figures," said Schatz.

Relocation of police and a larger Community Center are part of a long-running debate in town on how and where to house emergency services, city administration and other activities. The fire station has structural problems that place it in jeopardy in the event of an earthquake. Most city administration functions are performed in cramped quarters. The council is scheduled to consider new public safety facilities at its Oct. 20 meeting.

"Nobody wants to go up against any constituencies," Dodero said after the meeting, when asked whether he would bring the relocation proposal back for another look. "Nobody wants to take the city's priorities into account."

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