

County board approves satellite highway shops

By Amy Smith Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 11, 2015 9:49 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday gave the go-ahead for constructing two new satellite Highway Department facilities in Lake Mills and Concord.

An initial proposal of \$1.2 million was approved last week during a joint meeting of the board's Highway and Infrastructure committees; however, the county staff was able to reduce costs further.

“Based on feedback we received from staff, we looked for an opportunity to do better,” Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said.

Originally proposed in the \$17.89 million Jefferson County Highway Department construction project, the two satellite shops will be built on county-owned land in Lake Mills at the interchange of Interstate 94 and State Highway 89, and the site of an existing satellite shop in Concord at the interchange of I-94 and County Highway F.

The county's 2014 budget included \$17.89 million in general obligation bonds to fund construction of the new main facility, two satellite facilities and \$950,000 in remediation costs at the current site. Of that total, \$1.5 million was budgeted for the satellite shops, or about \$750,000 per site.

The project approved Tuesday calls for two 12,500-square-foot buildings at a cost of \$500,000, which is \$250,000 less than the initial price. The building pricetags include the base cost, \$45,000 for the construction of a unisex restroom and \$15,000 for a private well and septic.

County Supervisors also on Tuesday authorized issuing \$3.98 million in general obligation bonds to fund the final piece of the highway shop project, which is almost \$1 million less than the original project budget, bringing the grand total to \$17.22 million. The debt accrued from the project will result in a tax rate of \$0.188 per \$1,000 equalized value for 2016, or less than a penny under 2015's rate of \$.195.

In the county's original proposal, taxpayers would have faced a 2016 mil rate of about \$.193 per \$1,000 equalized value.

Currently, the county's Highway Department operates out of five satellite locations in Waterloo, Lake Mills, Ixonia, Concord and Palmyra. The Waterloo site was built in 1945 and includes a 575-gallon diesel tank, but no salt storage. The site is considered in very poor condition and is difficult to utilize due to its location on the corner or outside of the county.

The Ixonia and Palmyra sites are in similar states as the Waterloo site and also do not offer salt storage. The satellite building in Ixonia, which was constructed in 1959, does not fit the modern trucks, and the Palmyra site, built in 1941, mostly has been abandoned.

It has been suggested that the county might sell or demolish the buildings and sell the land at all current locations except Concord.

The need for two new satellite facilities when the county already has four sites was questioned by Supervisor Amy Rinard.

“If having two satellite facilities increases response time and efficiencies, why doesn’t having four satellite facilities result in greater efficiencies and greater reductions in response time,” Rinard asked.

Highway Commissioner Bill Kern said the efficiencies in response time is found by looking at the plow routes and the site locations.

“The existing sites, based on where they were placed many years ago, are in very inefficient spots,” Kern said.

“Not only are the facilities old facilities that are not working out, but they do not have salt at them and they are at locations in the corner of the county, so you are not going to see the benefits of having a site in a more central region.”

Kern had noted during a Dec. 8 meeting that the proposal for the Concord location at N6496 County Shop Road in Oconomowoc is ideal because it falls at the Highway F and I-94 interchange.

The second location, also located along I-94, is a 10-acre site in the Town of Lake Mills acquired by the county for \$353,000 in 2012 with the intention of it becoming home to a new satellite shop.

Several years ago, the state Department of Transportation built a salt storage shed on the property under the agreement that the site eventually would become a satellite facility. The two committees approved the locations of the proposed satellite shops during the joint meeting on Dec. 8, asking County Administrator Ben Wehmeier to come back with a smaller building that would meet the bare minimum requirements.

The need for the updated satellite shops stems from several concerns, but most importantly, a reduction in critical response time during winter storms and emergencies, Kern said during Tuesday’s meeting. The planned locations would reduce the manpower required for winter maintenance and minimize overlap of the current snowplow routes.

Kern noted that the Highway Department would be able to better utilize employees who work near the Lake Mills and Concord locations, allowing them to report directly to the satellite shop rather than the main facility in Jefferson.

The Concord site is about 19 miles from the main facility. Working straight from the Concord location could save between 150 to 200 miles of snow plowing overlap during a winter event, or about \$30,000 in savings per season, according to Kern. The Lake Mills site is about 11 miles from the Jefferson facility and could save about 90 miles in overlap or \$20,000 in savings, the commissioner added.

Four trucks, a loader and a small truck would be stored at each satellite shop, along with emergency devices and equipment, which would help to cut additional response time. Trucks would remain at the satellite shops throughout the winter, with minimal trips to the main facility for maintenance and washings. Crews would be able to run general maintenance work in the facilities, stop for breaks, refuel trucks and refill on salt.

The Jefferson County Highway Department has responded to 86 calls during this year’s winter season. A typical call has ranged from eight to 10 hours and each truck used one tank of fuel and two loads of salt, according to Kern.

Kern said he hopes that with the addition of the new satellite facilities, staff will be able to reduce plowing time by about 30 or 45 minutes.

“These aren’t numbers we make up ... it’s pretty easy to look at how they add up,” Kern said.

Supervisor Dick Schultz agreed, noting that in 20 years, the county could see savings of up to \$1.4 million.

“That’s a pretty substantial amount,” he added.

By Supervisor John Kannard’s math, however, the savings did not add up.

“In 50 years, we wouldn’t break even,” Kannard said. “It is amazing to me that we have a taskforce trying to figure out how we are going to survive five years down the road and at the same time, we are adding more infrastructure.”

During last week’s joint committee, Kannard presented the board members with information on a Dane County highway facility that he considered bare bones. The location included a salt storage shed and minimal storage for trucks and equipment with no heat or restroom facilities.

He also provided visuals showing the proximity of public restrooms to both Lake Mills and Concord sites, noting that employees could easily use public facilities to save on costs.

Supervisor Carlton Zentner agreed with Kannard on Tuesday night, noting that the potential for cost savings will not outweigh the costs associated with borrowing more money and the upkeep of the facilities.

“I think the timing is particularly bad,” Zentner added. “We have already hooked up 83,000 people that pay taxes to paying for the original, big shop, and now to tack on a couple little guys at the end. We don’t have to spend all that money.”

Rounding out discussion, several county board supervisors spoke in favor of the project, including Greg David, Ron Buchanan, Mike Kelly, Walt Christensen and George Jaeckel.

David reminded the board that the proposal up for vote was considerably scaled back from the initial proposal, which called for two satellite facilities with a price tag of \$1.5 million each.

Kelly added the benefit of reduced response times greatly outweighs the added benefit of operational cost savings.

Jaeckel reiterated that point, noting that having a truck just a half-hour closer might save someone’s life in an emergency situation.

“I think this is a very good investment for the county in the long run,” Jaeckel added.

In other business, the board:

- Authorized a cooperative agreement relative to transportation planning services in the portion of Jefferson County included in the Milwaukee urbanized area.
- Authorized the purchase of a truck scale, mobile vehicle lift and floor scrubber/sweeper by the Jefferson County Highway Department.

- Authorized the sale of a parcel of county owned property along County Highway B in the Town of Aztalan to David Messmer.

The property is adjacent to Messmer's property and was held by the county as a highway right-of-way, which is no longer needed.

- Approved a resolution authorizing Wehmeier to enter a \$281,467 contract with General Communications to purchase and install new public safety software, hardware and related dispatch equipment in order to upgrade the Jefferson County Sheriffs Office's current dispatch system.

About \$162,000 of the system upgrade is funded by budget carryover from the sheriffs office 2014 budget, and the balance will be funded by the county's contingency fund.

- Approved an addition to the St. Mary Magdalene Cemetery.