

County highway shop tours June 9

By Amy Smith Lifestyles editor | Posted: Wednesday, June 3, 2015 9:26 am

JEFFERSON — The public is invited to view the new Jefferson County Highway Department facility during an open house Tuesday, June 9.

The \$15.37 million highway shop, for which ground was broken in early August, is in its final stages of completion after more than a decade of planning. It is located on the former Countryside Home site on the southwest side of Jefferson.

The open house will take place from 4 to 7 p.m. and include a dedication ceremony and tours of the building, which utilizes approximately 11 acres of the 40-acre plot and necessitated demolition of all of the existing buildings of the county's former nursing home.

The Highway Department started moving its fleet of 60-plus vehicles to the new site this week and hopes to be settled by next week, County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said.

Wehmeier added that paving around the facility was completed Tuesday and final touches on the landscaping will be finished in the next few days.

“Overall for a project of this complexity, I think it went very well,” the county official said. “We had the initial hiccups ... But it's been a great project that is going to fulfill the county's needs for many years to come.”

Finding the proper channel for fulfilling those needs has been a lengthy process, however.

Before finally reaching the groundbreaking milestone in August, the county had conducted at least six studies and was led by four different county board chairpersons, three county administrators and two highway commissioners throughout the duration of the process.

The county officially committed to building a new off-site facility in 2013 with the purchase of the former Countryside Home property and a slew of contracts for the demolition of the existing buildings and design of a new facility. The county spent \$200,000 on the site, another \$12,000 on an environmental study and additional monies for the abatement of environmental problems and building demolition.

However, discussion of building a new highway shop first started in 2000 as Omni Associates completed a building and space needs study recommending replacement of the old Puerner Street facility. Five additional studies subsequently were solicited, most of which in some way recommended building a new facility instead of remaining on the current northside riverfront site.

Results of a site analysis study by Barrientos Design were reviewed by the county board in May 2011. Through the initial study, it was determined that the Highway Department required approximately 112,000 square feet of space. Nearly half of that space was for vehicle storage, a repair garage, shop offices, parts storage, restrooms that require locker rooms and administrative offices.

Other sites considered throughout the years included the former Briggs and Stratton Power Products and Schweiger

Industries buildings. Further debate ensued and the final site and size eventually were selected.

Built in the 1930s, the site of the old highway facility is located on a parcel of land bounded by West Woolcock, North Main and West Puerner streets and the Rock River.

Currently, the county is in discussions with the City of Jefferson, which has plans to redevelop the 18.34-acre site as part of its downtown revitalization master plan. The plan, originally implemented in 2006, is undergoing an extensive update to include plans such as a public park on the riverfront and mixed commercial and residential use.