DESIGNING FOR THE COMMUNITY: SHARED PUBLIC SAFETY FACILITIES
TRENDS: SHARED POLICE AND FIRE FACILITIES
For many communities across the country, the police and fire departments occupy their own buildings. While their commitment to public safety is the same, each organization has unique functions and needs when it comes to a facility, whether it's storing large apparatus or detaining criminals; dealing with the community or interviewing witnesses. Despite their uniqueness, it's what they share in common that is motivating more cities and towns to move forward with building shared facilities for their police and fire departments.

SHARED PUBLIC SAFETY FACILITY
37-YEARS IN THE MAKING
In Medfield, Mass., the idea of sharing a facility is more than 37-years old. In 1962, the town opened its fire station, and in 1977 the town’s police department opened its part of the facility. For the 16 full-time police officers and part-time firefighters working in the building during that time, the arrangement worked well. It presented an opportunity to share real estate and resources, and to keep costs down for the small community.

Move forward 37 years and the situation has changed. The town has grown to more than 12,500 people, and the same building now houses 18-22 full-time people in the police department and eight full-time and 15 part-time firemen. The fire chief’s office is a converted ladies’ restroom and the current holding cells don’t pass the state inspection. The fire department stores one of its apparatus in the basement garage, and when the engine is started, the adjoining locker room and lunchroom fill up with diesel exhaust.

“Back then, no one envisioned the size of the apparatus that we would be using today, which I’m sure is a common challenge for many agencies across the country,” said William Kingsbury, Medfield Fire Chief.

Police Chief Bob Meaney added, “I’m on my second uninterrupted power supply (UPS) for the year because of drops in electricity. We fried the mini ports for fiber optics, and there simply isn’t room for anything more.”

A PUBLIC SAFETY FACILITY FOR THE COMMUNITY
In the past year, Medfield fire and police chiefs have worked closely with their staff, the town and architects from Dore & Whittier (Architect of Record) and the nationally recognized public safety firm of CR architecture + design (Public Safety and Design Lead) on a plan to replace the facility with a state of the art, 36,000 square foot building that will meet the needs of a growing emergency services team. Even when the idea of separating the departments into two buildings was brought up, it was never considered.
“We’ve never had any issues working together or sharing a building,” said Chief Meaney. “In addition to the costs savings, there is limited real estate in town, and it is much easier to get the support of the community for one building versus trying to justify two.”

Chiefs Kingsbury and Meaney developed a wish list of spaces and concepts for how they would look, and over the course of several months have presented the preliminary designs and plans to team members, civic leaders and community members.

Meaney commented, “I worked in another emergency services agency for 24 years. Fifteen years ago, they built a new police station. The plan for the Medfield building is better thought out and much better designed, and if we made it 40 years with our first building; this one will easily make it the next 60 plus.”

While still in the design phase, Medfield’s shared facility will provide a gathering place for large group community meetings, and allow emergency services to share one dispatch point, training space, emergency generators and the costs of HVAC systems and other utilities. The building will also provide each department with much-needed amenities such as evidence storage and processing, detention cells that meet standards, and detective cubicles for the police department, while the fire department will receive a six-bay drive-through apparatus, support space and seven dorms.

is much different than creating a building for a fire department. Developing the building to support how each department operates, while also planning for shared amenities, is critical when considering a joint facility.

“The most important thing our architects did was listen to us,” said Kingsbury. “When it comes to planning a facility like this, it’s less about what the building will look like, and more about its function. You may have the most stunning, award-winning building in the middle of Iowa, but that may not work here. D&W and CR listened to how we do business and designed it around our processes and needs.”

THE DRIVING FACTORS FOR SHARED FACILITIES

Many cities and towns across the country have already started or completed the process of merging the departments under a single roof. For CR’s projects, the buildings are not cookie-cutter facilities, rather they are designed to meet the unique operational needs and environments where they are or will be built. The driving factors for replacing independent operations with shared facilities varies by community, but there are some commonalities, including the age of existing buildings, a shortage of real estate, and costs.

After Hurricane Hugo destroyed the City of Isle of Palms police department in 1989, a replacement building was quickly constructed. Unfortunately, it lacked the adequate space for officers to do their jobs. With the city already in the process of building a new fire station, the city proposed combining both departments into a public safety building.
FLEXIBILITY IN DESIGN
“With the police department outgrowing its facility, it made sense for our community, from a real estate perspective and cost savings, to share the building,” said Fire Chief Ann Graham. “The basic design of the building was already agreed upon, and CR was vital in planning and designing the combined facility while responding to each departments specific needs.”

The city’s limited real estate and expansive flood zone drove the footprint of the building upward with the final design featuring three stories. In addition to the fire and police departments, the three-story facility is also home to city dispatch and is designed to withstand hurricane force winds up to 150 mph. It also features a 1,500-gallon diesel generator capable of supplying the building with continuous power for up to two weeks.

The building includes four fire-apparatus bays, prisoner processing, an armory, a secure kennel and shared fitness, and living and large group training space. CR incorporated several green features, such as a solar water heating system with solar panels, and energy efficient HVAC and lighting system. Equally important are the infrastructure and technology integrated throughout the facility to ensure flexibility, connectivity and communications during emergencies.

Graham explained that the groups share a training room, which doubles as an emergency response center, a gym and the central lobby. Each department has its own private entrance, but the ability to collaborate quickly and share resources is important to the community.

Graham added, “Having shared training spaces and other resources means that we are not duplicating our costs. In public safety, time is a critical factor, so the ability to simply walk across the hall when we need to coordinate is extremely beneficial to our departments and the city.” For the City of Oakwood, Ohio, real estate drove the development of a shared facility more than 10 years ago.

Assistant City Manager Jay Weiskircher remembers spending hours on space utilization and design with CR, and the process involving all of the stakeholders.

“The outcome exceeded our expectations,” he said. “Our shared facility is a one-stop shop. As an administrator, it is much easier running the operation when everyone is under one roof.”

Weiskircher added that it’s critical to spend all the time necessary on the front-end planning process and to make sure that all stakeholders have an opportunity for input. “It will save you time and money in the long run.”

Like Medfield, the fire and police departments in Scituate, Mass. are aging and in need of replacement. Both are more than 50 years old, and can no longer meet the daily workspace, storage and security needs of the departments. CR led the programming, space needs analysis and concept design for a new shared 27,960 square-foot complex that will house the police department, fire department and emergency operations center. The new facility, which residents of Scituate approved $16.2 million in funding for in December 2014, will include living quarters, three apparatus bays, joint dispatching, booking and holding areas, administrative offices, conference rooms and future expansion space.
COMMON CHALLENGES AND REASONS FOR SUCCESS
While the actual number of cities and towns moving towards shared facilities is unknown, many that have built them shared the same challenges experienced in communities across the country; aging or inadequate facilities, limited real estate and budget limitations. In addition to similar challenges, communities that have built combined facilities also share what has ultimately determined their success.

“It’s important that department chiefs are actively involved in the entire process, from concept to design to community relations,” said Chief Meaney. “Community and civic leaders also need to be behind the project, supporting it and selling it to the community.”

“Finally,” Meaney indicated, “it’s important to have the right support team. Our architecture partners not only created the design for our building, they are intrinsically involved in our community education efforts and making sure that the facility is the right one for our town.”

CREATING EXTRAORDINARY PLACES