

# The Process of Constructing a New Jail and Law Enforcement Center

by Mel Erickson, Director of the Eau Claire County Planning and Development Department  
February 14, 2011

---

**Mel Erickson** has been the Director of the Eau Claire County Planning and Development Department for over 20 years, and for almost half of that time has been at the forefront of the County's largest, and arguably most controversial, project of our lifetimes... the planning, design and new construction of the county's jail and law enforcement center and the remodeling of the courthouse.

Today, Erickson shared some of his thoughts and reflections on the "process"... the good, the bad and some of the lessons learned. He quipped that elements of this \$59.1 million project could definitely be characterized as a "lulu", which in planning parlance, refers to "locally unwanted land use"... at least for some in the community.

Erickson commented on several, what he referred to as, "points of deflection" that changed the project along the way. One of these points was in 2004 when the Durrant Group was hired to perform a space needs study. The Group performed the study in somewhat of a vacuum, and when their report was presented in 2005, many in the community perceived that all of the major decisions had already been made... and their views had not been considered. In hindsight, Erickson said, the county made a mistake by not doing a better job of involving more of the public earlier in the process. Therefore, this more extensive community involvement took place later in the planning process than it should have.

There was another faction in the community that felt that the jail and law enforcement space problems could be solved with "alternatives to incarceration". While the vast majority believe that this was never the case, these concerns did speed up the processes of researching and implementing more alternatives such as the Drug Court and recently started Veterans Court.

Another "point of deflection" was the April 2010 County Jail Advisory Referendum Question, where voters were asked where to build the new county jail... one option being by the current courthouse and just remodel the courthouse to suit the new jail, and the other option being to build the new jail and a justice facility, including sheriff office and courts, at another location designated. When the results of the referendum were tallied and almost 80% of those voting favored the current courthouse location, the location issue was settled.

According to Erickson, by the time ground was broken for the new parking ramp in last July, the delays and the debate, although frustrating to many, led to a better project. There was more time to re-access and refocus the needs and priorities, and to sharpen the pencil. It was also fortuitous that during the delays, the recession crept into the economy and put downward pressure on the bids. If the bids had been let in 2007, as per one of the earlier time lines, they would have undoubtedly been higher.

In response to questions, Erickson clarified that of the \$59.1 cost for the total project, approximately \$37 million is related to the construction of the new jail, with the remaining \$22 million for the new law enforcement center and remodeling of the courthouse. The final list of contractors and their bids will be presented to the County Board for their review at the February 15 meeting. If approved as is, 60% of the monies will go to local contractors, including Market & Johnson and B&B Electric.

For more information on the Department of Planning and Development, go to: [www.co.eau-claire.wi.us/CountyDepartments/planning\\_and\\_development/index.htm](http://www.co.eau-claire.wi.us/CountyDepartments/planning_and_development/index.htm).



**Mel Erickson** has been the Director of the Eau Claire County Department of Planning and Development since 1990. He has a bachelor's degree from UW-Eau Claire in Economics and Geography with an emphasis on Urban and Regional Planning, and has done graduate work at UW-Green Bay in Environmental Administration.