



Trimble: The Time for a New Justice Center is Now

John Trimble April 22, 2015



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Your Indianapolis Bar Association continues to advocate for local government leaders to face the justice system facilities crisis head on, urging prompt action on whatever financing model can be agreed upon to move a project forward toward construction. Our Justice Center Task Force Chair, John Kautzman, accompanied by IndyBar President-Elect, Judge Robyn Moberly, delivered the following message to the City-County Rules Committee on April 14th :

“My name is John Kautzman and I am the Chairman of the Indianapolis Bar Association’s Justice Center Task Force. I come to you on behalf of IndyBar President John Trimble, President-Elect Robyn Moberly and the IndyBar Board of Directors to share with you our position concerning the important issues before you. The Indianapolis Bar Association is a volunteer organization of nearly 5,000 legal professionals, including lawyers, judges, and paralegals, committed since its inception to promoting justice in Indianapolis and Marion

County.

A significant part of serving that mission encompasses ensuring safe, dignified and equal access justice facilities for all of the citizens in Indianapolis. Judges, lawyers, clients, witnesses, jurors, and indeed every visitor to the courthouse should be able to expect facilities that have sufficient capacity to handle the people’s business while providing a safe and secure environment for visitors and employees alike.

The current concerns with the City-County Building are hardly a new concept. In fact, in 1998, the Indianapolis Bar Association originally commissioned what was then called the “Security Task Force” due to mounting safety concerns in the City-County Building as a result of prisoners being transported through the public corridors every day. The Indianapolis Bar Foundation provided a \$50,000 grant to pay for a one-month pilot project that installed metal detectors at each of the entrances to the City-County Building to finally provide much needed security for the building’s occupants.

At the expiration of that trial run, city and county officials had begun to dismantle the metal detectors, citing the inability to pay for the much-needed security. However, only a few days after the pilot project ended the world as we knew it changed on Sept. 11, 2001. City and county leaders, to their credit, quickly reinstalled the metal detectors which have become an inconvenient yet necessary fact of our daily lives.

Since then, the Indianapolis Bar Association has mounted several campaigns asking that the inadequate space and ongoing security concerns within the building be addressed by the construction of a new justice center facility. Yet administration after administration, Republicans and Democrats alike, have never been able to find the right time or the right funding to proceed with a project that all agree is badly needed.

As of this date, the need for a new jail and new justice center facilities cannot seriously be debated. We urge the City-County Council to act promptly so that we do not have to wait for another life-changing tragic event—occurring within these walls—as the catalyst for a project that should have been addressed long ago.

Indeed, a 2002 letter to the editor from the Indianapolis Bar Association wrote about the public safety crisis existing in the City-County Building at that time. The article noted that the then-40-year-old government office building that had been retrofitted to serve more than 30 courts in a building that was designed for 16 was bursting at the seams. This letter stated that “prisoners are transported in the midst of jurors, judges, witnesses, parties, victims, and even children; hearings and even some trials are conducted in tiny ad hoc hearing rooms where security risks are great and justice is cheapened; jurors are moved about like cattle, at times even having to sit on the floor awaiting their next move; many hearings on contentious matters take place without law enforcement officers even on the same floor; lawyers have no choice but to counsel their clients in the midst of crowded hallways with opposing counsel or parties nearby.”

Now, nearly 15 years have passed, and despite the well intentioned efforts of our civic leaders, the hodgepodge of Band Aid approach fixes is simply not keeping pace with the demand. The only solution is a new jail and courthouse facility.

There are many divergent views on the current proposal, put forth by highly respected individuals on both sides of the aisle. The Indianapolis Bar Association does not take a position regarding this particular funding approach and financing proposal before you tonight. We are prepared to leave the details of appropriating sufficient funding for such a project to this legislative body and the financial advisors who you rely upon.

However, we are here to say that the need for a new jail and justice center facility is undisputed, and the time for such a project is now. We believe it is incumbent upon our civic leaders to leave the politics at the door and craft a bipartisan solution to whatever financial challenges exist so that the people who visit the courthouse and the various individuals working in the legal process are provided with adequate and safe facilities to carry on the daily business of promoting justice in our community.

It must be specifically noted that we have consistently avoided any endorsement of any particular plan, focusing instead on the clear need for a solution that needs to happen now. We feel that it is the duty of our elected leaders to solve this dilemma responsibly—but promptly.

The answers are not easy and the solutions may not be obvious, but providing reasonably secure and adequate space for the judicial system of the 12th largest city in the United States is an essential function of government and should be one of the top priorities for the city’s resources.

Again, we take no particular view on any proposed financing model, and we applaud your efforts to insist upon fiscal transparency. Yet, the Council must once and for all deal with the ongoing challenges presented by our current facilities. We thus urge immediate steps be taken to develop and implement a plan that eliminates inefficiencies, ensures safety and establishes well designed, appropriately dignified

and spatially adequate facilities—a plan that will work for the judiciary, the men and women who work in the justice system and the thousands of Indianapolis citizens who visit the courthouse every year.

It is certainly appropriate to question the costs associated with any public project. But one must also not lose sight of the cost of inaction. The Indianapolis Bar Association respectfully requests that you not allow this can to be kicked any farther down the road, and that you act promptly to face this challenge and work diligently on a plan that makes these much needed public facilities a reality.”

As I submit this message for publication, we do not know the final fate of the project. But regardless of the outcome, our association needs to continue to push for immediate steps to be taken to solve the ongoing challenges. We plan to reach out to the courts, other stakeholders and civic groups to join with us in demanding that this issue not be shelved. The council needs to work with the current and/or incoming administration to quickly resolve the practical and philosophical roadblocks in order to put some workable plan back on track NOW.

If we allow the decisionmakers to turn back to the procrastinating inertia of the past, we will continue to put lawyers, judges and the public in harm's way. Further delays are not an option. We owe it to our members, our profession and the community we serve.