

**Franklin Park Asks:  
Could pricey new police station have been avoided?**

Critics say rundown station could have been better maintained



At the Franklin Park police station, water drips steadily from soggy ceiling tiles into plastic trash cans. (Chuck Berman, Chicago Tribune / March 7, 2011)

What happened to the Franklin Park police station is a crime, some say. Water drips steadily from soggy ceiling tiles into plastic trash cans. Tangled webs of antiquated electrical wiring share space with water-damaged police reports and evidence in the often-flooded basement. And a musty stench lingers in a meeting room, two interrogation rooms and a small office — parts of the 1950s-era building that have been condemned. "It's pretty embarrassing to be perfectly honest with you," said Franklin Park police Chief Michael Witz.

What to do with the rundown station has become a controversial subject in the cash-strapped suburb of about 20,000, just south of O'Hare International Airport. Witz and others are convinced that a planned multimillion-dollar project to replace the aging building could have been avoided had the structure been better maintained. "The problems have been presented to the Village Board for the past 15 years," Witz said. "Had we stayed up to speed with the roof ... today it would not be costing the taxpayers what it's about to cost."

And conducting police business, officials say, would be a lot easier. Officer Thomas Henniger said water had trickled into a police interrogation room for months, and mold was starting to build on the ceiling before he and two other officers decided to do something. They filed a complaint in late 2009 through the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 47 about the deteriorating building to the Illinois Department of Labor's Division of Safety Inspection and Education. "We knew that it had really gotten out of hand when it would continue to leak long after it had stopped raining," Henniger said.

Village President Barrett Pedersen remembers learning of the station's crumbling condition when he was first elected and started attending Village Board meetings in the station's boardroom. "Engineers told me that had the building been repaired years ago like it should have, it would have been repairable," he said.

The village is now negotiating the \$2.2 million purchase of a 13-acre property from Unilever Illinois Manufacturing LLC about a block east of the station. Plans call for a 30,000- to 35,000-square-foot police headquarters to be built there. The project is to be paid for by taxpayers through a \$10 million bond approved last year by the Village Board. Property owners would pay an additional \$41 per \$50,000 of assessed value, said Village Comptroller Ron Heller.

Former Village President Daniel Pritchett said repairs were made to the roof as needed every couple of years, but that with budget constraints and competing infrastructure projects, any major overhaul of the building was out of the question. "We knew it was going to take millions, so at the time, we patched the roof, we did what we could to make it work a little longer," said Pritchett, in office for 13 years until he lost his post in 2009 when Pedersen was elected. "It's like driving an old car. You make repairs on it, but eventually you're going to have to replace it."

The accumulating problems can no longer be put off, reports show. Parts of the building — including a meeting room where Village Board meetings were held, two interrogation rooms and a small office — were condemned by the Labor Department after the police complaint, village officials said. Replacing the roof and repairing damaged brick and masonry would cost an estimated \$378,767, according to consulting firm Structural Technologies, which assessed the roof in 2009.

Experts say neglecting roof repair can create myriad other problems, including mold buildup in the insulation and air-conditioning vents. "When you look at structural issues, it all starts at the top," said Bill McHugh, executive director of the Chicagoland Roofing Council, a group of union-affiliated contractor firms. "The roof can create trouble if it's not maintained."

But the roof was only part of the building's problems, reports show. On top of the thousands of gallons of water trapped in the roof's insulation, electrical and mechanical equipment were out of code, there was no fire alarm or sprinkler system, and there was no access for people with disabilities, according to a 2009 report by Clark Dietz Engineers.

Built in 1957 for \$150,000, the one-story brick building in the 9500 block of Belmont Avenue originally housed village administrative offices, the police and fire department offices and garages, according to an article published in The Journal newspaper in April 1957. Municipal services later moved into another structure across the street

Meanwhile, eight additions were added to the building, said Jeff Eder, director of community development for the village. The roof has three layers, though according to the village's building code, structures are to have no more than two layers, Eder said. "If a structural engineer brought something like that to my attention, I would have to shut down parts of that building, much like what happened here," Eder said.

Some argue that officials have not exhausted more cost-effective options. Franklin Park owns several properties in the village, said Village Trustee Paul Bellendir, who last month voted against the Unilever purchase. "Do we need a new building? Yes," Bellendir said. "Can we afford a \$2.2 million property? The town has limited access to funds, so for the most part you're relying on property taxes."

Temporary solutions were explored, but officials determined any short-term fix would cost more than it would be worth. Some residents seem to support village efforts to replace the police station. "I don't care what happened. I care about where we're going," said Ron Schammert, an insurance agent. "If the police officers don't have a safe place to work, that is not good for the town."

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