

Good-bye cramped quarters

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Expansion of police department underway.

Police officers Matt Langley and Joe Humphrey have gotten accustomed to the hammering and sawing a hallway away from their office.

Yes, that's right.

Langley and Humphrey share an office with each other and four other members of the Gothenburg Police Department. Six officers also split time on one computer and one telephone although most days they are not all there at one time.

Sharing office space means stuffing investigation notes and other materials into duffel bags or briefcases they take home at night.

Because of tight quarters, evidence is stored in individual officer lockers in the communications room. A couple of tiny rooms in the department are available for interviews and meetings but that's about it.

Soon that all will change.

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Once an estimated \$120,000 renovation job is finished and a garage added to the back of the building they share with city hall officials, officers will have an additional 2,686 square feet.

Expansion began in February

City crews started the project the first week of February when they removed walls and a cement floor from a large room behind the police department used by senior citizens.

Paulsen Inc. workers arrived a week later to take over.

When completed, a new hallway will divide men's and women's bathrooms along a public corridor that leads to city council chambers.

What used to be a recreation room is being transformed into four cubicles with desks, computers and phones for each officer plus a cubicle for agencies such as the Nebraska State Patrol and Dawson County Sheriff's Office when they are needed on a case.

"The officers will finally have a place for their own stuff," police chief Randy Olson said.

Having their own space for work materials is important because—unlike larger law enforcement agencies who have specialized investigation officers—local law officers do their own investigations.

Olson, who has his own office in the existing police department, will remain there while sergeant Matt Langley—who trains officers—will gain an office in the same area.

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In the past, Olson said officers have felt especially confined during big cases like homicides and disasters.

Homicide showed limitations

The stabbing death of Duane Morrison at a local alfalfa processing mill in December 2008 is a good example, Olson said.

“We had our officers working the case, the sheriff’s office, the state patrol and there wasn’t any space,” Olson said. “People were trying to make phone calls and you couldn’t hear.”

A large amount of evidence obtained in the case took over several rooms.

Olson also points to a tornado that ripped through the countryside west of Gothenburg in 2007 that illustrated the need for more space.

The sheriff, civil defense and fire department all worked out of the police department during and after the disaster.

Expanding the department has been a dream concept for a long time, he said.

Although several options were considered such as including a move to another place, they decided to renovate the recreation room and add a garage.

Transport security needed

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The garage will be a secure area to bring in and take out prisoners as well as accommodate two police vehicles, equipment evidence storage.

Olson said officers will radio in to open the garage door. They can then secure their weapons before unloading prisoners.

All activity will be captured on security cameras mounted in the garage, alley and building to eliminate any potential liability issues, he said.

The east part of the garage will house a couple of city travel vehicles.

Storage will be built in above the garage that can be secured.

In addition to officer cubicles, the renovated recreation room will also have an interview/conference room, a smaller interview room, space for training and planning, a small break room and a unisex bathroom.

Mostly repairs and repainting will take place in the existing police department in addition to the removal of a wall to widen an existing room that will house records, evidence and the officers' evidence lockers.

Evidence is stored and lockers are now in a small room along with communication and computer equipment.

"When we have the phone lines or computers serviced, someone has to stay in the evidence room with the technician because there's evidence in there," Olson explained.

Project part of city growth

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With Gothenburg continuing to grow, he said the department will probably add a seventh officer which the new space will accommodate.

Before the project began, Olson said the police department had gotten to the point where it was becoming difficult to be professional.

“We also have a great bunch of officers that we want to keep,” he said. “The longer they’re here, the better work they do.”

The department moved to where it is today from the southeast corner of city hall in 1992.

Olson headed up the department at the time and remembers that, with the exception of installing plumbing, electricity and heat, the rest was done by the city crew and volunteers.

“It’s a lot easier on me this time because Paulsen’s has commercial carpenters,” he said. “I’m surprised how fast they’ve done this project especially compared to the first remodel.”

The project is expected to be completed sometime in June.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com 308-537-3636

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