



La Plata County takes long view with taxpayer resources

Oct. 2, 2016

For those of us who have been in La Plata County for any length of time, there is no question that our community has changed significantly – in the last several years and over the past several decades. With a growing population in our incorporated areas and out in the rural county, an increasing demand for services and infrastructure, and a shrinking pool of resources to meet those needs, we here in La Plata County government spend considerable time and brain power looking for ways to meet those demands within our limited means. It is quite a balancing act and one that requires long-term planning – for all of La Plata County’s departments and services.

Many of us may not think about it this way, but the county cannot provide the services and infrastructure required of us without adequate facilities to do so. This has always been the case for La Plata County, and as we have experienced nearly a 14 percent increase in population between 2005-2015 – with no sign of stopping – we recognized many years ago that the county needed to reconfigure its facilities to continue meeting our wide-ranging service obligations.

In 2012, the county completed a facility master plan and has been applying its strategies since, using cash reserves from the days when gas and oil revenue was abundant, set aside for these needed one-time investments. The La Plata County Courthouse is being remodeled and expanded to become a shared facility that will provide space for many functions including U.S. District courtroom, federal probation, the U.S. Marshal’s office, the Sixth Judicial District Attorney, probation and court space, as well as county court and the county attorney’s office. This space became available when the county purchased and remodeled the Vectra Bank Building – now known as the County Administration Building, where we commissioners work alongside the finance department and the Assessor’s Office. Our building, planning and code enforcement departments – known collectively as Community Development Services – were displaced with the courthouse remodel but are settled in to their much more easily accessible building at 211 Rockpoint Drive in the Durango Tech Center.

Each of these purchases was carefully considered, framed in the 2012 facilities master plan, and in most cases, leveraged with additional dollars from grants and partnerships. The latest in this

series of investments came just this month when the county closed on the purchase of 10 Burnett Court, a building we had been leasing since January 2015 to house the Department of Human Services. With this purchase, we make the wise fiscal transition from leased space into a facility that La Plata County owns, and ensures the long-term stability of this critical county department. At \$9.975 million – a figure derived from the appraisal process laid out in the purchase contract – 10 Burnett was a major investment, to be sure, but one that meets a significant facility need and opens options for making better use of other county buildings.

Our facilities plan is not just about purchasing new buildings, but making the wisest and best use of the space and resources we have. As we invest in these long-term facilities needs using dollars put into reserves long ago for that purpose, we have the opportunity to put our outgrown facilities to better use for the taxpayers. The Old Main Post Office is one such building that is not particularly well-suited to house county offices – and our goal is at some point in the near future to sell that facility and recoup some of the investments we have made in facilities. This is sensible and strategic stewardship of county resources that strikes the challenging balance between our responsibility to provide services and infrastructure to our residents with a shrinking pool of resources to do so. The math is no picnic, but ensuring as much fiscal certainty as possible by housing county offices in space that La Plata County owns and that will meet our growing demands for county services for years to come, is our responsibility as stewards of your tax dollars. Not one of these is a discussion or decision we take lightly and I thank you for entrusting my colleagues and me to take on these challenges.

Please feel free to contact any of the commissioners with questions, comments or concerns. Call our office at (970)382-6219 or email us: I can be reached at brad.blake@co.laplata.co.us; Vice Chair Julie Westendorff at julie.westendorff@co.laplata.co.us, and Commissioner Gwen Lachelt at gwen.lachelt@co.laplata.co.us.

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