

City of Columbus, WI

ROADMAP 2050

A 30-year Plan for Strategic Investment in Critical City Facilities

Executive Summary

DRAFT May 26, 2019



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was initiated in 2018 to evaluate and plan upgrades or replacement of critical City facilities, including City Hall, the Public Library, the Senior Center, the Community Center, the Police Station, the Fire Station, and the Public Works campus.

Growth Trends and Projections

The City is projected to grow to a population of about 6,000 by 2040, an increase of about 20% from 2020. However, there are concerns that such growth will not happen unless more land is made available for development and the community invests in its school facilities. The CET and Council identified investment in the schools as critical to continued private investment and growth in Columbus. They then paused the Roadmap 2050 process to allow the community to focus on a School District referendum to invest \$30 million in school facilities. That April 7, 2020 referendum passed with 63% approval.

There have been noteworthy changes in household income and educational attainment since 2000. U.S. Census Bureau data from 2000 indicated that Columbus households had lower incomes and fewer high school and college degrees than the state average. While both income and educational attainment have increased statewide, Columbus's averages are now higher than the State.

Community Engagement Process and Findings

The planning process was coordinated with public engagement for the Comprehensive Plan Update, led by a Community Engagement Team (CET) of City residents and City staff. The initial engagement process included focus groups (165 participants), a community survey (627 responses) and a potluck meal and meeting (60 participants) in Spring 2019. Working meetings with City staff and City Council supported development of a draft plan, which was distributed for public feedback in June 2020 via an online comment form and a public information meeting.

Community feedback revealed few concerns or complaints about the critical City facilities. More prominent in the community comments were concerns about the condition of the downtown and the condition of Columbus Public Schools facilities. The City initiated conversations with the School District and School Board to share findings and offer support for investment in school facilities, recognizing that quality schools are important to the future of the City.

Community Facility Findings and Recommendations

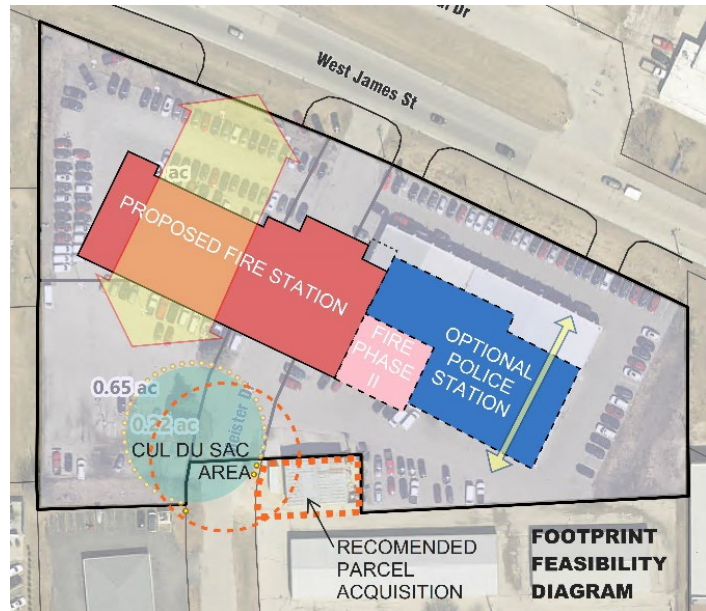
Every major City facility was found to have deficiencies that require investment, ranging from routine maintenance to complete replacement. The facilities are presented in order of priority for investment, based primarily on the severity of current conditions or deficiency. All costs are in 2020 dollars.

Public Works (High Priority)

The current site is too small and in the floodplain, rendering it vulnerable when it is needed to support emergency response. The five structures totaling about 14,000 SF are in varying degrees of disrepair. A new facility totaling 36,000 SF of new space on 6-8 acres is recommended, at an estimated cost of \$5.4 million. The City should watch for viable site opportunities and be ready to acquire the land at any time. Development of the new site could occur in stages if necessary.

Fire Station (High Priority)

The current facility and site are too small for current needs and cannot accommodate community growth or expanded cooperative efforts with the surrounding towns. A new 21,000 SF facility is recommended, at an estimated cost of \$5.8 million. This should happen as soon as feasible, likely on the former Countryside Ford site on West James Street (see conceptual site plan at right). Exploration of a regional fire district is recommended before the facility program and budget are finalized.



City Hall (Medium Priority)

The structure is in good condition but has continuing maintenance needs. A total of \$2.5 million in repairs is anticipated over the next 20 years, including brick repair and tuckpointing, sealant replacement and roof maintenance. A dedicated conference/committee meeting room is needed. The second-story auditorium is a low priority improvement as a public expense, with an estimated restoration cost of nearly \$4 million, but remains an interest if supported by private fundraising.

Senior Center and Community Center (Medium Priority)

The current Senior Center building is a former automobile repair business; it is undersized, awkwardly configured, and in need of roof replacement. The current Community Center building is a former bank converted to a multipurpose meeting space, but it lacks common amenities. A new facility that combines these functions would be about 12,000 SF and cost approximately \$4.5 million; the current site east of City Hall is ideal. The City should proceed with maintenance on the Senior Center to get another 10 years of use until a new facility can be constructed.

Library and Annex (Medium Priority)

The library structure is historic and in good condition, but too small for current needs. The adjacent Library Annex supplements needs for meeting spaces, but it is an awkward arrangement. A new facility of about 20,000 SF is recommended, at a cost of about \$7 million. The library could be connected to or part of the new Community Center building on the City Hall block.

Police Station (Low Priority)

The Police Station is a former law office. It is in good condition, but not well suited to the purpose, lacking common features to ensure the secure handling of files, evidence and detainees. The City should eventually construct a more secure facility connected to the Fire Station. A 14,000 SF facility is recommended, at a cost of \$4.2 million.

A schedule for the needed investments is proposed.

Project	Suggested Timing	Total project cost*	Approximate size	Notes
Fire Station	2023	\$5.8 million	21,000 SF	New construction on acquired site
City Hall	2024, 2029, 2034, 2039	\$2.5 million	NA	Periodic maintenance & limited remodel
Public Works Facilities	2025	\$5.4 million	32,000 SF	New site, includes salt shed & yard space
Community/Senior Center	2028	\$4.5 million	12,000 SF	New facility, suggested adjacent/attached to City Hall
Library	2033	\$7 million	20,000 SF	Suggested as new facility, attached to Community Center
Police Station	2040	\$4.2 million	14,000 SF	New facility, attached to Fire Department

*2020 dollars

Fiscal Conditions and Recommendations

Levy Limits

The City's ability to raise revenue for operating expenses is constrained by statutory levy limits tied to the value of new development. Debt payments are not subject to this limit, meaning the City can take on new debt if it wants to (subject to separate limits on debt). The City also has the option to raise the levy by referendum.

Capital Borrowing Projections and Recommendations

The City currently has about \$8.2 million in debt dependent on general tax revenue for payment (and about double that counting the portion that will be covered by utility fees and tax incremental finance revenue). State Statutes cap municipal debt of this type at 5% of the total taxable value of the City. Columbus has a local policy capping debt at 65% of the state limit, and the City is currently at 35% of the state limit. Debt capacity projections are dependent on the rate of growth in new taxable property; this study is assuming a 3% annual growth rate, which requires growth in housing.

The City has continuing obligations for other capital projects besides building maintenance and replacement. Per an existing City policy there is a target of \$500,000 each year in spending to reconstruct deteriorating streets. A 10-year plan for the replacement of various City vehicles and equipment projects annual costs ranging from \$200,000 to \$1.5 million for things like police cars, plows and mowers. These costs are expected to occur every year for the next 30 years and are included in capital spending projects.

The City can take on debt for a new Fire Station in 2023 and proceed with some repairs to City Hall in 2024 without exceeding the local debt limit. The next major recommended project is the Public Works facility in 2025. That project would require the City to exceed the local debt limit, which City Council can approve with a super majority. Projections beyond 2025 include a Community Center in 2028, a new Library in 2033, and the new Police Station in 2040, plus other building repairs, road reconstructions and vehicle replacements throughout the next three decades.

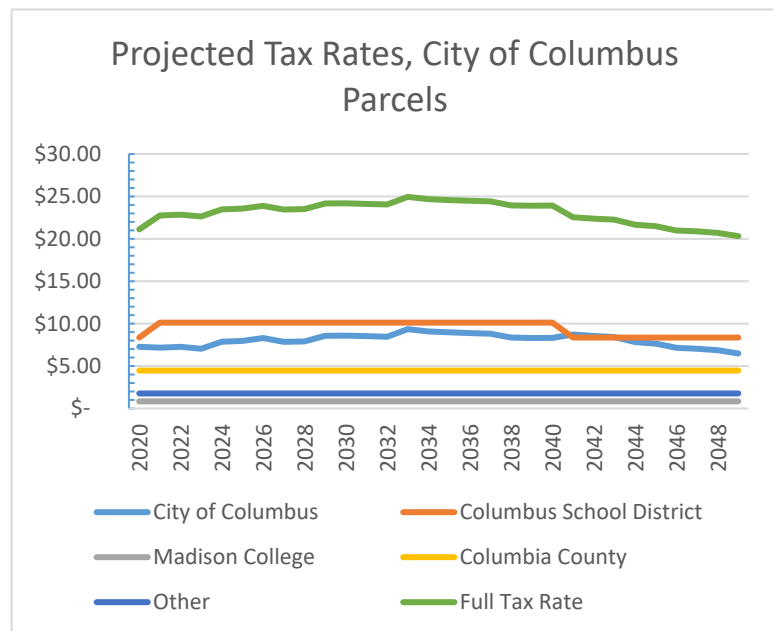
By these projections, the City would never exceed the state debt limit, but would exceed the local limit each year from 2025-2038.

Tax Impacts

Property owners in the City of Columbus had a 2019 full tax rate of \$21.10/\$1,000. The \$7.27 portion for the City included \$2.14 in debt service. The borrowing projections for all capital expenses, including buildings, streets, and vehicles, show tax rate increases due to the needed facility investments, first to about \$3/\$1,000 in 2024, \$4 in 2028, and peaking around \$4.55 in 2032. In 2032, the debt service load would result in about \$683 in taxes on a \$150,000 home.

City of Columbus taxes have been as high as \$8.67/\$1,000 in the past decade (2013). The projected capital spending would increase the City's tax burden, but, assuming other costs are held level, it would not exceed the 2013 rate until 2032, when debt payments would take it to \$9.35/\$1,000.

It is important to acknowledge that the City's spending is only a portion of the total tax burden, and to consider the effect of the recent Columbus School District referendum. The approved spending is projected to take the School District's levy from about \$8.36/\$1,000 to \$10.12. The combined effect of School District and City capital spending is a total tax rate on City of Columbus property increasing to \$23/\$1,000 and rising further to a peak of just under \$25 in 2032. For context, the rate over the past 10 years has fluctuated between its current low of \$21.10 and a high of \$25.16 in 2013.



Recommendations

- The City is encouraged to proceed with a series of major capital building investments over the next 20 years – these facilities are needed to support quality of life and growth. This will require decisions to exceed the local debt limit.
- The City should actively pursue funding assistance with these projects as feasible, including regional cooperation on Fire Department investment, Community Development Block Grant assistance with a new Senior Center, and the possibility of flood mitigation assistance to move Public Works.
- The City is encouraged to continue work on other projects and efforts to make Columbus a great place to live. This includes investments in downtown buildings and business success, investments in and collaboration with the School District, and continued support for excellent staffing and programming by the Library, Senior Center and Recreation Department.