

https://www.pinalcentral.com/florence_reminder_blade_tribune/news/pinal-at-work-on-new-32m-elections-building/article_0c76aef9-6f4e-5751-8e7f-2b9090e6a609.html

FEATURED

TOP STORY

SPOTLIGHT

Pinal at work on new \$32M elections building

By MARK COWLING Staff Writer

Apr 5, 2023



Pinal County is constructing a new \$32 million elections building in Florence. In addition to the Elections Department, the building will house the voter registration and early voting functions of the Pinal County Recorder's Office. The goal is to have the building staffed and operating by May 2024, 90 days before next year's primary election.

Pinal County

FLORENCE — Without a groundbreaking ceremony or other fanfare, Pinal County has begun work on a new state-of-the-art elections building to relieve cramped quarters and promote efficiencies.

"Time is of the essence," Pinal County Recorder Dana Lewis said. She and Pinal Elections Director Geraldine Roll hope to be in the new building before primary election season next year.

"We're trying to jump ahead, quit doing Band-Aid fixes, and have a facility that can handle the growth we're going to experience in the next 10 years," said Board of Supervisors Vice Chairman Jeffrey McClure, R-Eagle Crest Ranch, whose district includes Florence.

The building will be at the site of the old Pinal General Hospital at Central Avenue and Adamsville Road. McClure said compaction grading was already underway in a March 29 interview. "We truly are grading right now to get ready to put footers in the ground."

The building will increase Elections Department square footage from around 12,000 today to about 51,300. Officials said it's all space that's needed and will be put to good use. The current facility in Coolidge is not designed for 350,000 voters and is "an unbelievably cramped space," Roll said.

The new building will "cut down on the chaos and eliminate any possible confusion. There's a very nice flow where ballots will come from the Recorder's Office into our early ballot receiving," Roll said.

"The tabulating room is much larger than our present tabulating room, which on election night, particularly, gets very crowded and creates opportunity for mistakes. ... There will be sufficient room for an audit board to operate independently before those ballots make it into the tabulating room, and be sure the tabulators know what they should get.

"We are currently in two separate buildings, so elections staff will now have the opportunity to share the same space," improving communication, Roll said.

Keep it moving

Lack of space has meant some tasks had to be idled for more urgent ones. With the new building, county staff can "keep it moving, make it a smooth process rather than this chopped-up operation," McClure said. "You have space to set up 100 polling places out in the warehouse; you don't have to do it in the middle of where you're working."

To ensure chain of custody of early ballots, voter registration and the recorder's early voting division will be in the new building. The rest of the Recorder's Office will remain in the county complex on Pinal Street with the county treasurer and county assessor, Lewis said.

McClure said delivery of ballots will be simpler and more secure than what's been done in Coolidge, which has meant closing Main Street so that a truck may back in. The building is also designed so it can be expanded when necessary. "We own the whole block, so we don't have to move it again," McClure said.

Another plus will be better security, he said. Lewis agreed, saying staff will be able to enter through a secure area, “and confidently go to their work station and know that they are taken care of.” The 2020 election saw a brick thrown through the window and vulgar graffiti on the side of the building and the sidewalks. “When you have people who come on to assist us, getting us through these elections, that can be disconcerting and off-putting,” she said.

Need seen in primary

The need for a new modern building became evident to Pinal officials following problems in last year’s primary election.

“A number of county officials and management had an opportunity to come to Coolidge and have feet on the ground and help out during a trying circumstance,” Roll said. “That may have been their first opportunity to see how many people it takes to do an election, how they were fitting into the space and how the space was working for the management of an election. I think that played into the idea that we probably needed a different location and a different building.”

McClure said officials and staff had seven or eight weekly meetings before arriving at the final form of the building. “It was pretty awesome to watch everybody come together as a team and move forward on it as quickly as we did,” Lewis said.

Total budget is \$32 million, including furnishings. As opposed to hard bids, it will be built according to the “construction manager at-risk” model. Rather than expensive change orders over the course of construction, issues are worked out ahead of time and “it speeds up the process,” McClure said. General contractor is FCI Construction of Glendale. Swan Architects designed the building.

“As things come up we can modify things, so it results in additional savings,” Deputy County Manager Himanshu Patel said. The goal is to be under budget, “but we needed a top number. Now it’s my job to make sure we use as less as possible of those dollars,” Patel said.

The goal is to have the building staffed and operating in May 2024, 90 days before next year’s primary election. “We’re hoping our first delivery of (early) ballots will be at our new location,” Lewis said. Roll said, “I think our ultimate goal is when we have ballots hitting the ground for the primary, that we’re able to deliver them to the new building, so ballots are not moving in midstream for the primary.”

Meanwhile, other county staff are also hoping for more efficient and modern work spaces. McClure said they haven't been forgotten, "but it's just not coming this year. We're still in talks about that."

Mark Cowling

Mark Cowling is the county reporter for PinalCentral and covers the town of Florence, San Tan Valley and the surrounding area. He can be reached at mcowling@pinalcentral.com.