

“Planning and Funding a New Training Facility”

by Bill Booth and David Schoonover / Fire Engineering

Start with the end in mind. That is a key point to keep in mind when planning for a new training facility. Focus not just on what you need today but also on your future needs. Because of the costs involved, a new facility will likely be operational for 20, 30, or even 50 years down the road.

In the fast-changing world of public safety, more and more fire departments are finding that their current training facilities are outdated and sorely lacking in the equipment and props needed to adequately train their growing numbers of personnel. Both within departments themselves and within the communities they serve, most people recognize the need for highly trained professionals to serve in the fire department. But while the need is easily acknowledged, figuring out how to plan and ultimately fund a new or refurbished facility is often daunting to departments.

Planning is essential. Any new business venture is enhanced by a straightforward, well-researched plan; training centers are no exception. When writing a comprehensive business plan for the development of a training center, it is imperative to fully assess the needs of the department and other involved entities, as well as the cost of building and maintaining the facility. Departments also need to look to the future, mapping out their expected growth and the training requirements that will accompany that expansion.

A solid business plan assesses current and future needs, identifies costs and synergies, and culminates with a clear funding objective. Without a doubt, obtaining funding is a business problem. Engineering and architectural firms are on the front lines and can provide valuable input into the process, but they can contribute only part of the equation. A business plan delivers the full equation—everything needed to move a project forward.

In essence, a business plan should answer every question that elected officials or grant providers are likely to ask. These questions include the following:

- Who will use the training facility?
- What training will the facility provide?
- What will it cost to operate the facility annually?
- In the case of multiple partners, how will the center be managed?
- What are the training facility's costs and practical benefits?
- Should the facility be open to outside users to generate revenues?
- What private, local, state, or federal funds are available?
- What is your funding strategy?

A comprehensive business plan can facilitate a broad range of goals in building a training center. But, most importantly, a plan is crucial for obtaining the necessary funding. Ultimately, without a comprehensive cost analysis, elected officials and grant providers are reluctant to open the coffers for development. There is competition for that dollar, and a business plan gives departments an extra edge when applying for limited funding.

SEVEN-STEP APPROACH

The cost of new training facilities runs the gamut, depending on the size and requirements of individual departments—from \$500,000 to as high as \$50 million, or even more. The San Jose (CA) Fire Department's initial planning process concluded with a \$48 million price tag—about double the amount it received through a bond issue.

In San Jose, the department has benefited from the passage of a public safety bond issue that allowed the city to earmark about \$20 million of the \$189 million total for a fire department training center. Other departments may not be so fortunate and instead will have to lobby for funds or grants from local and state elected officials as well as from national government agencies.

Following is a seven-step approach to planning for a new training facility, culminating with the most crucial step—the funding strategy. In fact, the previous steps become obsolete unless the department can convince those holding the purse strings to support their cause.

Needs assessment. Identify exactly what the departments using the facility will need to ensure proper training for the immediate future and for several years down the road.

- How many classrooms are needed?
- How much office space?
- What about a tower, hazmat equipment, EMS, or special operations training?

These and myriad other training requirements could figure into a needs assessment, based on the specific needs and desires of the individual departments involved. The needs assessment may also assess the feasibility of sharing facilities with other public safety organizations or with community colleges and also evaluate the possibility of charging tuition for training outside agencies.

San Jose's experience: Figuring out what was needed required seeing what others were doing. Trips to state-of-the-art training facilities in other states helped identify the right approach for San Jose. We advocate talking to others who have been through the process, finding out what worked and what didn't and what they'd do differently if they had a chance.

We also benefited from having spent four years researching and completing a Training Master Plan. By going through a "forecasting" process (see number 3 below), we identified the types of training we wanted to do and how frequently we planned to provide it. We projected the number of students per day times the hours of training to identify size and number of classrooms. By listening to department personnel involved in specialized training, we were able to identify special props and classroom needs.

2. Operations plan. Out-line the day-to-day management and operations of the training center. It is essential to map out details such as class scheduling, operational procedures, safety issues, and procedures for delivering training courses that meet national standards and unique local requirements. The operations plan may include logistic and managerial scenarios for possible joint partnerships with other agencies or the local community college.

San Jose's experience: We knew that our new training center would not be a collaborative effort with other public service agencies. Except for a driver's training course, police and fire departments each would build new and separate facilities. Still, to assess all our training needs, we came up with a year-round training calendar that has eight concurrent, parallel training tracks. Then when trying to pare our budget, we needed to juggle some scheduling to maximize use of such basics as classroom space and parking facilities. We also plan to open the facility for outside use where warranted. For example, our three urban search and rescue (USAR) companies need classrooms, a specific site layout, and specific training props. They may use the dedicated facilities only 15 weeks of the year, so we'll offer our facilities to others. There are nine other agencies in the county, and several of them have rescue squads. We can share resources.

3. Facility assessment. Expanding on the needs assessment, identify the scope and magnitude of the training facility, zeroing in on the number of classrooms and offices, as well as types of specialized training equipment. Also identify the most cost-effective and advanced specialty training equipment available. The evaluation should take into account future needs as well as current requirements. One of the biggest regrets voiced by many departments is that they didn't look into the future and assess their needs 20 or 30 years down the line.

San Jose's experience: We recognized that we needed to forecast where the fire department and the fire service were going to be 30 years from now. By graphing the growth history of both the department and the city over the past 30 years, then working with city planners to assess where the city will be 30 years from now, we came up with a plan that projects the department will grow by at least 25 percent during that period. That means 25 percent more turnover, 25 percent more people hired and promoted, and 25 percent more training needs (classroom space, parking, training officers). When incorporating this information into our planning process, it made us realize that while our current recruit academies average 25 people, designing a classroom for 30 isn't the best course of action. In the future, recruit academies are probably going to be averaging 35 or so people, so now we're designing classrooms for 40. The crystal ball approach was also necessary in anticipating training that we aren't currently offering but would like to in the future, and planning for that expansion. We had to develop a vision of the future, a vision of what fire training was going to be like for the San Jose Fire Department 30 years down the road.

4. Site requirements. If a specific site exists, review potential infrastructure costs, permits, and neighborhood issues. If no site has been identified, establish the minimum size required, identify potential environmental issues, and create a budget for land acquisition.

San Jose's experience: We knew from our initial facility needs study that an ideal location addressed environmental concerns (smoke, noise, night lighting, water runoff) and "not-in-my-backyard" issues. Ideally, it would be central to most stations, to reduce travel time, and in an industrial area away from residential development. The \$20 million in bond money doesn't have any funds earmarked for site acquisition. We are currently negotiating with the city to find a suitable site on city-owned land. But compromise is essential. Our original study identified 18 acres as "ideal" to accommodate all our training needs. Instead, if financial negotiations are successful, we'll probably end up with about 10 acres. Everyone we talked to identified the need for space as critical, including space to expand for unforeseen future needs.

5. Financial assessment. A crucial question, of course, is how much everything is going to cost. Outline the cost of building the facility (based on the needs assessment), taking into account local construction costs. Provide estimated values for all aspects of the training facility's design, construction, operation, and maintenance as well as revenue potential. Include an estimate of annual operations expenses.

San Jose's experience: We started with a grant from the city council earmarked for conducting a training center facilities study. This followed a Santa Clara County grand jury report issued in 1998 that said our training center was outdated and inadequate and the city needed to build a new one. The result of that study was a plan for a \$48 million facility. Our plan was nearly finished when the public safety bond became a reality, which was providential since we had discussed such an approach within the department. The bond resulted in \$20 million earmarked for a fire department training facility. Since we received the bond money, we've been trying to whittle away at what was "ideal," getting down to the must-have items while leaving space for future expansion.

6. Cost-benefit analysis. This step is crucial when pitching your project to elected officials and other sources of funding. Outline the benefits of a training center, documenting as much as possible the tangible and intangible advantages to building the facility. Answer such questions as:

- Why is the training center a good use of capital funds?
- Who benefits, and why?
- What legal requirements does the training center serve?
- What is the revenue potential for the training center?
- Does joining with other departments or jurisdictions provide benefits?
- How much should each partnering agency contribute to the project, and why?

Be sure to clearly answer these questions.

San Jose's experience: We learned fairly early in the process that a joint police-fire training facility wasn't feasible. The cost benefits weren't significant, and the amount of land required for a joint facility would be extremely difficult to find in the city. But the biggest problem we anticipated was explaining to the political powers why we needed the new facility. The big question—Will this help the fires go out faster?—is difficult to answer, to say the least.

7. Funding strategy. Explore all possible funding outlets, such as local, state, and federal grant opportunities. It's unlikely that you'll receive all the funding at once; instead, be prepared to accept phased-in funding that allows you to meet immediate needs but requires you to postpone some of your long-term desires. Also, pay attention to budget cycles and filing deadlines. Most grants are offered only once a year; miss the filing date, and you'll wait another year.

San Jose's experience: The \$20 million in bond money doesn't come close to meeting the financial requirements of our original plan, which had a \$48 million price tag. We are now designing a training center that costs \$20 million and meets most of our immediate needs and as much of our future needs as possible. It is designed to be able to expand to meet those future needs as they arise. Success requires a clear vision and being able to articulate your needs in a manner that your governing body is going to buy. This has been a failure of the fire service over the years. We're very good at fighting fires, but we're very bad at political speak. You have to be able to speak to the decision makers with data and clear numbers, which means getting rid of the emotional arguments. It also means recognizing that there is competition for that dollar and you are competing with interests that may be better at articulating their needs than you are. Part of it is simply letting go of ego. Everybody wants the biggest, the best, the most. That doesn't work in public governments anymore. We are identifying what we can outsource, where we can share re-sources. It's not just what we want but how it all fits in with the community we're serving in terms of location, cost, political realities, and the realistic needs of the fire service. But we haven't given up the dream of eventually having a training facility that will have all the things we want.

A comprehensive business plan takes all these seven building blocks into account and presents them in a clear, concise manner. As a result, your department can avoid haphazard and un-researched ideas about what you need and come together with a cohesive plan for the future. The planning process is critical.

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