

AMOS backs Polk courthouse renovation plan

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The proposal, presented at an event Saturday, includes some recommendations from the group.



The former Penney's building just north of the Polk County Courthouse would be remodeled to house juvenile court functions and magistrate court functions, plus the county attorney's offices. / OPN Architects Inc.

A community organization of faith and advocacy groups has endorsed Polk County's proposed \$81 million courthouse renovation.

A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, or AMOS, announced its support Saturday.

The three-phase plan to expand the courthouse space and update the historic building at 500 Mulberry St. in Des Moines, presented at AMOS's restorative justice conference by former Polk County Supervisor Martha Willits, includes a

number of recommendations AMOS made for the design. A bond referendum for the project will go before voters Nov. 5.

"This is a victory for AMOS," said Denny Coon, pastor at Walnut Hills United Methodist Church in Urbandale and a member of AMOS's criminal justice leadership team.

AMOS called for the new court facilities to include space for pretrial conferences and mediations; a system to keep youthful offenders away from adult offenders; discreet spaces that keep youth out of the public eye when brought into the courtroom; and a setup allowing for juveniles to sit eye to eye with judges in the courtroom.

"To see how the structure can change how we engage with each other, sitting in circles and looking at each other, instead of the judge up here looking down on the offender, that's a success," Coon said.

Just under 200 attendees gathered at the Plymouth United Congregational Church on Saturday for the conference. In addition to the courthouse, topics included racial profiling, reports from AMOS court watchers, and restorative justice programs for juvenile offenders.

Participants in West Des Moines' Youth Justice Initiative shared their experiences in a restorative justice program as an alternative to the court system for youthful offenders.

Rather than focusing on punishment, restorative justice programs bring together in a circle offenders, victims and community representatives to recognize everybody's needs, and the offender makes a plan to repair the harm he or she has done.

“You’re not just going to court and getting a slap on your wrist and you’re back out there,” said Alec Neumann, a past offender who was referred to Youth Justice Initiative after getting caught shoplifting. After completing the program, Neumann stayed out of trouble, improved his grades, and got into college.

Another participant who had gotten in trouble for fighting spoke through tears about how the program helped her realize the support she had from her family.

Brigitte Black, pastor at Bethel AME in Des Moines and co-chairwoman of Saturday’s conference, said AMOS’s goal is to get other municipalities in Polk County, especially Des Moines, to embrace a similar program.

AMOS is also working to implement mediation in schools, so young people have access to restorative justice circles before crimes are committed.

“Building this restorative justice way of engaging with each other is really critical,” Coon said. “Any time you sit down with people in circles and talk them out of getting revenge in a physical way, that’s got to be good.”