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Help for stations

$2.5 billion proposal by Kerry could revive new Northampton police HQ

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NORTHAMPTON - Legislation announced Thursday by Sen. John Kerry could breathe new life into all-but-dead plans to build a new police station here.

Recently the Northampton City Council put the project on hold indefinitely after it became clear the city couldn't afford the $17.9 million price tag without some outside help.

Kerry's bill, called the "Protect Those Who Serve Act," proposes to offer federal grants totaling $2.5 billion over the next five years for police station construction and upgrades around the country.

It's a long shot, but if the bill is passed into law and Northampton makes a successful bid for some of the money, the city could close the police station budget gap. The shortfall is about $5 million.

"Two weeks ago our building project was virtually on life support," said Police Chief Russell Sienkiewicz. "This just gives us a glimmer of hope that we might resuscitate the project successfully."

The bill could also create new opportunities for a combined police and fire complex in Granby, which is slated to begin construction soon.

Town Manager Chris Martin said some design features - like a "sally port" for transferring prisoners from cruiser to cell - had to be cut to keep the project within the $6.4 million approved by voters. Some of those features could be put back in if the town qualifies for a grant, Martin said.

The Granby Police Department currently operates out of the former Granby Dinosaur Museum on Route 202. The new facility is to be built at the corner of State and North streets.

"We really need to have better facilities for our police to be able to do their jobs," Martin said.

Granby got a mention in Kerry's remarks as he unveiled the bill at a breakfast in the capital marking National Police Week.

"Only in Washington would we call our police officers heroes on one day and then stick them with crumbling, dilapidated working conditions the next," the senator said in a prepared statement.

"It's an insult that we've got police and law enforcement officers stuck working in temporary trailers in Ashby, shuttered dinosaur museums in Granby, and even working out of their cruisers on the street in Brimfield. My legislation is a commonsense solution that will give our law enforcement officers the decent work conditions they need to keep our communities safe."

Kerry's bill proposes offering communities grant funds provided they can match the federal money with a certain percentage from their own coffers. Northampton would need to provide a 10 percent match, while Granby would have to provide 5 percent.

Under the bill, the job of distributing grants would fall to the U.S. attorney general.

Sienkiewicz said he passed on an invitation to the Police Week breakfast. But he asked friend and East Longmeadow Police Chief Doug Mellis, who did attend, to thank Kerry personally for sponsoring the bill.

On a brief visit to Northampton a year ago, Kerry got a private tour of the city's current police station on Center Street. The 12,000-square-foot facility, built in 1965, has long been considered too small and outdated.

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"He thought it was deplorable," Sienkiewicz said of Kerry's opinion of the station.

The proposed new facility would be built directly next door to the current one, and include a 32,000-square-foot headquarters and two-story parking garage.

Northampton officials had been holding out hope the project could get a boost from the federal economic stimulus plan, but that now seems unlikely, Sienkiewicz said.

Massachusetts received $8.7 billion in stimulus money. Of that, Gov. Deval Patrick recently announced $71 million would be allocated for public safety programs and projects, including everything from fire stations to port security initiatives to emergency homeless shelters.

Matt Rocheleau contributed to this report. James F. Lowe can be reached at jlowe@gazettenet.com.

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Fri, 05/15/2009 - 07:54 — Merlin

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