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WATERTOWN The Boston Globe

Police station cost estimate said to be low

By Christina Pazzanese, Globe Correspondent | April 8, 2007

What will it cost to build a new police station for Watertown?

Town officials are working with an estimate of \$14.1 million. Of that, the only firm figure is the \$1.1 million approved last month to pay the architects.

The remaining \$13 million is based on a projection made last year by Phyllis Marshall, the town's treasurer and tax collector, and a member of the Police Station Building Committee.

"I tried to factor in associated construction costs and ballparked it to a number I thought was reasonable," Marshall said Monday. Acknowledging it was still early in the process, she said she's confident that it is a "valid number."

Marshall said the town would have firmer cost estimates within six months when Kaestle Boos Architects submits its designs for the project.

"That's sounds low to me," construction consultant Peter Timothy said of Marshall's estimate. Timothy works for A.M. Fogarty and Associates, a Hingham firm that evaluates the accuracy of building estimates.

He put the ballpark cost for a police station in a town of Watertown's size at \$375 per square foot for construction, with "soft" costs such as legal or project management fees, permits, environmental requirements, furniture, and equipment adding another 30 to 35 percent.

A feasibility study done by Jacunski Humes Architects for the town in May 2005 estimated the construction cost at \$250 per square foot.

Based on Timothy's square-foot figure, the total price of the police station -- including the architect's fee and soft costs -- would run more than \$18 million.

Watertown plans to build a 34,500-square-foot facility on about 5 acres occupied by the old Browne School on Main Street.

The cost projection is made more complicated by other factors besides rising construction prices, such as the time of year bids are put out and the number of firms that are competing.

"You can never predict what the market will bear until you open those

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envelopes," said Brooke Trivas, a principal at Tappé Associates, an architectural design firm in Boston.

Based on the volatile market for such materials as concrete and steel, Trivas said, her firm tells communities to expect cost increases of at least 5 percent a year until work begins.

"You can't predict in '07 what is going to happen in three years," said Trivas, whose firm designed Natick's Town Hall and its combined police and fire station.

"These numbers are changing almost daily; it's a moving target," said Eric Kluz, a principal with HKT Associates of Somerville, which is designing a police station in Charlestown. Kluz said the cost for its project is now at \$450 per square foot.

Watertown's Town Council president, Clyde L. Younger, said he had not anticipated the cost of the station increasing beyond \$14 million.

"I was going on that number was pretty close to what it was going to cost," Younger said.

If the price indeed rises, he said, the town may have to put off other projects.

Christina Pazzanese can be e-mailed at cpazzanese@globe.com. ■

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