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Crime lab needs are evident

By: Bob Sigman, Opinion Page Editor

Much of the news about the one-quarter-cent sales tax renewal in Johnson County is focused on jail expansion, but there is another important project on the Aug. 5 primary ballot. That is a proposed new building to house our crime laboratory.

Come to think of it, there is not much day-to-day news about our crime lab, either. The nature of its mission warrants little media exposure.

Yet it is extremely important, a critical part of our criminal justice system.

The responsibilities of the scientists who work out of the present lab, located in Mission, include examining evidence from crimes and delivering expert court testimony for the prosecution and/or the defense.

That may appear to be a simple role. It is not. Complicated scientific processes are in play that have a profound impact on the outcome of criminal cases.

Though we may not realize it, the work at the lab helps keep our community safer.

An agency of the sheriff's office, the lab serves that operation, the district attorney, the cities, all other criminal justice institutions in Johnson County and the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, according to Gary Howell, lab director.

These observations are pertinent because the present facility has become overcrowded and outmoded in our high-tech age.

"The current building has been modified four times since 1975 to accommodate the needs of the public safety community," said an informational briefing by the sheriff's office.

Little wonder. The staff has more than tripled since the 1980s, according to county officials.

There is no mystery here. The population of Johnson County has been growing at 3 percent a year, which is a challenge for the lab, in and of itself. Worse, serious crime rates, according to FBI statistics cited by the sheriff's office, have been increasing 9 percent a year.

Translated to people, in 2005 Johnson Countians were victims of 15,844 serious crimes – murder, rape, robbery, arson and burglary among them.

Without question, the county sorely needs a new building.

A consultant retained to study the needs said the lab should have at least 51,000 square feet of space. The current one has about 19,000 square feet.

New technologies are a factor in the need for more space.

Howell said in an interview the science and methods of criminal probes have changed markedly in recent years. DNA analysis, computers and digital capability are among the tools that Howell said enable the lab to gather much more sophisticated evidence for building sound cases.

Using the technology, special investigators can reconstruct a crime scene. That allows them to detect factors that might not have been discovered in the past.

Developing the most compelling criminal proof for trial has another side, Howell pointed out. The spate of television programs on crime scene investigations in recent years has sharpened public awareness of this phase of criminal detection. Juries have come to expect technological advances that they see on television to be utilized in actual trials, he said.

Howell is not exactly a household name in Johnson County. He was hired by Sheriff Frank Denning in January 2005. Before that he was director of the Kansas City, Mo., Police Crime Laboratory from 1976 to 2004. A graduate of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, Howell started in the Kansas City crime lab as a forensic chemist in 1968.

The native Johnson Countian is a graduate of Shawnee Mission North High School.

To better accommodate the crime growth and advanced technology, the county commission designated \$30.3 million of the sales tax renewal revenue for the new structure. It would be built as an addition to the Consolidated Communications Center, now under construction at the county's Sunset Campus at 119th Street and Ridgeview Road in Olathe.

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