

News-Sun

JAL EUNICE HOBBS LOVINGTON TATUM SEMINOLE DENVER CITY

Plans nearly set for HPD's new home

BETH HAHN
NEWS-SUN

The Hobbs Police Department could have a new home before 2009 comes to a close.

Plans are "about 90 percent complete" on transforming the former City Hall building at 300 N. Turner into a new police headquarters, city General Services director Ronny Choate said Thursday.

The 300 N. Turner building is in good shape overall, he said, but needs electrical updates and some reconfigurations of office space.

Before moving City Hall southeast a few blocks to Broadway and Dalmont, Choate said the city outfitted the

NEW HPD HOME

■ **WHAT:** Hobbs' old City Hall will be transformed into a new Hobbs police headquarters

■ **BUDGET:** \$1.2 million

■ **TIMELINE:** About 7 months



to do, but we've got a few walls to move," he said.

The city has about \$1.2 million budgeted for the transformation, which Choate estimated will last about seven months, once a bid for the work is awarded. City officials should begin the bidding process in March, he said.

Hobbs Police Chief J.D. Sanders said he is not as optimistic as Choate on a move-in date, but added he will be relieved to have more space for officers and supervisors.

"The (personnel) that are most cramped are the ones that are doing the most work," he said. "We have eight sergeants sharing one office ... patrol are scattered all over the place. (The

new building) won't just supply more space, it will provide more orderliness."

Another benefit to moving HPD next door is increasing the amount of space for evidence storage.

Sanders said HPD's current evidence storage is in "about five different locations" and consolidating will increase the department's efficiency.

Because HPD will relocate evidence storage as well as personnel, the current Motor Vehicles Department was sealed off from the remainder of the 300 N. Turner building.

City officials have requested that the state take over MVD operations and

move the office to a separate location.

Until the MVD moves, police could be split between the former City Hall and current Police Department.

The stucco building at 300 N. Turner was vacated in January 2008 when city offices moved to the former Moncor Bank building at the corner of Broadway and Dalmont.

City officials debated what to do with the empty space and eventually determined it would be a good fit for HPD.

Community groups including Teen Court of Lea County also requested use of the building at 300 N. Turner, but additional uses have become unlikely with the Police Department move.

WESTERN HERITAGE

Museum feeling squeezed

MICHELLE A. FOX
NEWS-SUN

The 29,000-square-foot Western Heritage Museum building is only three years old and already it is running out of space.

According to Calvin Smith, executive director of the Western Heritage Museum and Lea County Cowboy Hall of Fame, the museum would like to seek volunteers to help catalog and take in artifacts and historical relics, but there is no place in the building for volunteers to do this task.

"We can't even set up to let people help us," Smith said. "We would like to look for volunteers, but we are not ready."

The current building was completed in 2006 and cost \$8 million to build.

The new museum was built because the former facility was too small to hold the pieces of history coming in. The Lea County Cowboy Hall of Fame had been in the museum. Both are located on the New Mexico Junior College campus.

Smith said plans are in the works to expand the building but nothing has been finalized to present to the Western Heritage Advisory Board.

"I have to get it approved by our Western Heritage Advisory Board," Smith said. "I would say we are at least a month away."

If an expansion is approved by the Western Heritage board, it would then go before the New Mexico Junior College Board for final approval.

According to Steve McCleery, president of NMJC, there has been a lot of talk of expansion, but no formal plans. McCleery echoed Smith's comment that anything would have to pass the NMJC board for approval.

McCleery also said he would be in favor of doing expansions in phases.

"It needs additional storage space, office space and exhibit

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ANIMAL ABUSE LEGISLATION



KIMBERLY RYAN/NEWS-SUN

Amanda Barnett-Green pets a dog named Emma that she recently rescued. Emma's collar was so tight it became embedded in her neck.

Animal cruelty bills could impact Hobbs

■ **Nine cases of animal cruelty reported in Hobbs so far this year**

LEVI HILL
NEWS-SUN

Five bills are being considered by the New Mexico Legislature this year that could toughen the penalties for cases of animal abuse or neglect.

Gov. Bill Richardson announced his support for the bills Thursday through a release.

"This year I am supporting legislation that would make euthanasia more humane," Richardson said in the release, "and with the sharp rise in animal starvation cases I am also supporting a bill that would protect starving or mistreated horses and another to increase penalties for animal cruelty."

The five bills include HB 159, which proposes increased penalties for animal cruelty.

House Bill 159 could have a major impact in the Hobbs area. However, the bill's sponsor, Rep. Al Park, D-Albuquerque, could not be reached to comment on the specifics of the bill.

According to the bill's fiscal report on the state Legislature Web site, House Bill 159 amends the current animal cruelty statute by expanding the definition of animal to include captive reptiles. It also includes and defines criminal negligence as meaning anyone who knows or should have known of the dangers involved in certain acts and continued to act with reckless disregard, endangering an animal's health or safety.

Finally, it increases the penalty to a fourth degree felony upon a fourth or subsequent conviction or when convicted of aggravated cruelty. The bill also would prohibit leaving an animal unattended in a vehicle if the possibility of injury or death may occur.

A stronger penalty for offenders could make a difference in Hobbs, where nine cases of animal cruelty have been reported to the Hobbs Police Department this year.

Donnie Graham, deputy chief for the HPD, said animal cruelty cases are common in Hobbs, but are also underreported.

"A lot of dogs are in people's backyards and out of

sight of the police and animal control officers," he said. "We really rely on neighbors to report these kinds of cases."

TWO EXTREME CASES of cruelty and neglect were reported this month, thanks to the intervention of community residents.

The first occurred Feb. 1 at a Hobbs home, Graham said. Amanda Barnett-Green, area representative for the animal rights group Dogs Deserve Better, came across a 6-month-old puppy while visiting the home to deliver dog food.

"I was delivering some dog food to a contact I made during our Christmas present project," Barnett-Green said. "I asked if I could pet the dog."

Barnett-Green found the puppy tied to a corner fence post and suffering from a swollen neck. On closer observation she found the owners had put a flea collar on the dog and failed to take it off as the puppy grew. The collar grew into the dog's neck, cutting through flesh.

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OIL PRICES

West Texas intermediate	
Spot	\$39.48 + 4.86
Posted	\$36.00 + 5.00
Sour	\$29.15 + 5.00
N. Gas	\$4.078 - .136



New signs to warn residents of fire danger in county

MICHELLE A. FOX
NEWS-SUN

The iconic bear that quips, "Only you can prevent forest fires" will be seen more frequently in Lea County.

The county has purchased 10 Smokey Bear fire danger signs to install on major thoroughfares around the county at a cost of \$5,675.

"I have several orders for them," said Lorenzo Velasquez, director of emergency preparedness for the county.

According to Velasquez, the fire departments in Jal, Maljamar, Monument and Knowles have requested a sign. Tatum and Lovington asked for two signs apiece, while Eunice requested four signs.

The signs feature Smokey Bear standing next to a wheel that can be changed to reflect the fire danger. There are five levels — extreme, very high, high, mod-

erate and low. The fire districts that requested the signs in their areas will be responsible for changing the signs to the appropriate risk level.

The signs are part of a push to make the community aware of when the conditions are best for wildfires to occur.

In 2008, 109 fires burned more than 150,000 acres as well as 11 structures in Lea County, and the New Mexico Forestry Division spent \$420,000 helping combat fires in the county.

The Stiles Complex fire, which occurred in March 2008, started from two other fires — one started by a cigarette and the other started by sparks



from a car. Dry weather and high winds helped the fire rapidly burn into Texas.

"We experienced a lot of extreme fire conditions (in 2008)," said James Williams, chief of the Lovington Police Department.

The signs are part of a wildfire protection plan by the county to help prevent and better fight wildfires and hopefully avoid more fire-caused devastation.

"We want to protect our community from the devastation of wild land fires," said Ernie Wheeler, deputy Hobbs fire chief.

Along with the 10 signs ordered by Lea County, there is another Smokey

Bear fire danger sign near the Monument cutoff on N.M. 18.

The Hobbs Fire Department installed that sign as part of its own effort to educate residents on the concern of grassfires.

Similar signs can be seen when entering national forests.

"Anytime you go into a forest, there's a sign telling you what the fire danger is," said paramedic John Able of the Hobbs Fire Department.

Smokey Bear was created in 1944 as part of an educational campaign during World War II.

The living version of Smokey Bear arrived in 1950 when a bear cub with badly burned paws was found clinging to the top of a tree during the Capitan Gap fire, which burned 17,000 acres of the Lincoln National Forest.