

12/30/2005

Vernon public safety building ready for occupants

By: Jason Rowe, Journal Inquirer

VERNON - Contractors have wrapped up work on the new \$1.97 million, West Street public safety building, and now the town's ambulance corps is about to move in. Town Administrator Laurence R. Shaffer said the building should be fully operational within 30 days, after new furniture arrives in the state-of-the-art building.

The new 11,000-square-foot facility, which was designed to complement surrounding buildings in Vernon Center, replaces a cramped 4,800-square-foot Cold War-era building that wasn't even big enough to store the squad's two ambulances. Storing the vehicles inside was a crucial part of the project because state regulations require that temperatures inside an ambulance stay at 50 degrees or higher.

The old building didn't have garages, and ambulances would sit outside idling during the cold winter months, adding to fuel costs. Next to the new ambulance bay is a decontamination room, where ambulance workers can ditch clothes with blood or other hazardous materials on them. The room is a timesaver for the busy ambulance crews: before, decontamination had to be performed at Rockville General Hospital.

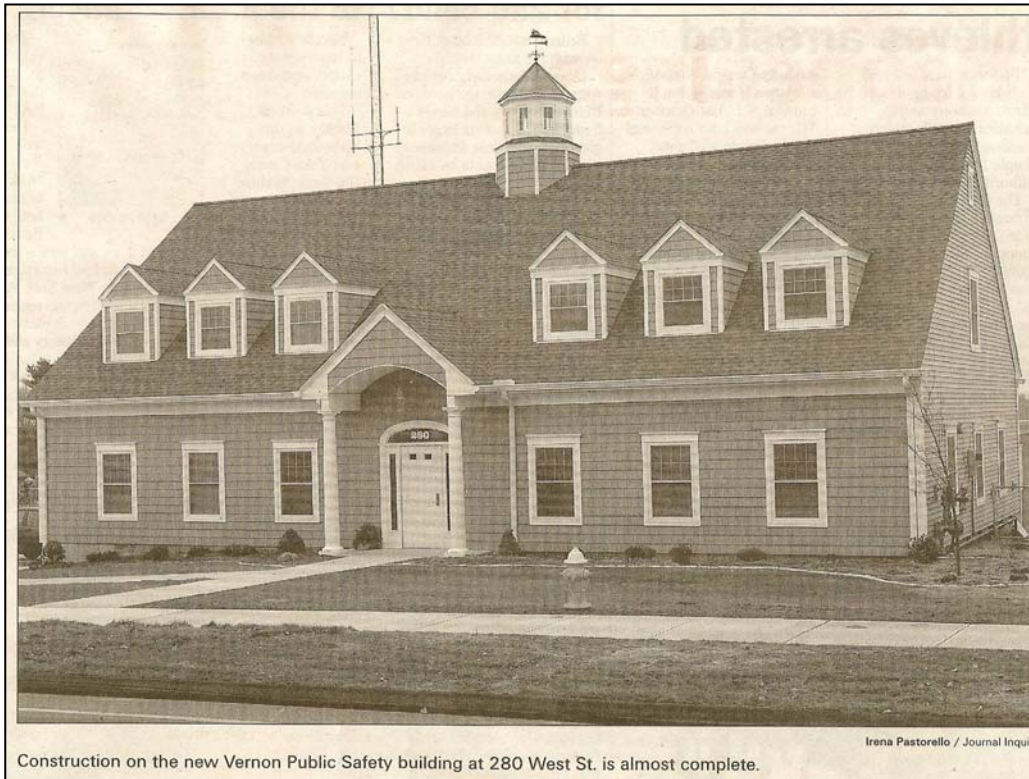
A tour of the new building's interior reveals a large community room complete with a full kitchen, which can accommodate meetings and classes for nearly 50 people. Adjacent to the community room, the town installed an emergency communications center, which can be used in the event of a town-wide emergency. Across the hall from the community room, new offices have been constructed for Emergency Management Director Michael Purcaro and Fire Department officials.

Shaffer said the office was designed to accommodate additional people, should the town need to hire a professional office staff to help manage the program. "The ambulance operation is getting to be enormous," said Shaffer, who noted that the squad responds to about 4,000 calls each year. "It's becoming increasingly difficult to manage the system and operate a system of this volume based on volunteers." Upstairs, two dormitory areas - one each for men and women - will allow ambulance workers who are on standby to stay in the station, improving response times, Shaffer said.

And because the new building is located next to the police station and will house offices for fire department officials, the town's ability to respond to emergencies should be greater, Purcaro said today. "I believe Vernon's new public safety building represents an important step forward for emergency management in the town," Purcaro said. "We have effectively enhanced our town's coordinated emergency response capacity."

The road to the new building has been a long and at times bumpy one that has stretched across at least two mayoral administrations. After initial bids came in at more than \$2 million, substantially more than the project's budget, Shaffer said town officials looked to save money. The public works department chipped in, performing demolition and site work and saving the town about \$300,000, officials said. The project's price tag was partially offset by a \$500,000 state grant. The remainder of the funding is coming from bonds approved by voters early this year. The bonds will be repaid by revenue generated by the ambulance service, which bills for its services.

In the end, Shaffer said the project came in between \$45,000 and \$50,000 under budget. That money will likely be used to acquire furniture for the building, he said.



Construction on the new Vernon Public Safety building at 280 West St. is almost complete.

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