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Center for Court Innovation

The Architecture of Collaboration: A New Courthouse in Colorado has Cooperation in Mind

A new building in Milliken, Colorado, houses a community court, police station and social services in an effort to foster collaboration among agencies and be more user-friendly for both the public and staff. Jim Burack, town administrator and chief of police, discusses the logic behind the building's design.

ROBERT V. WOLF: Hi, I'm Rob Wolf, director of communications at the Center for Court Innovation, and I'm at Community Justice 2012 in Washington, D.C., and I'm speaking to various people who are in attendance and presenting. And right now I'm going to take a little time to talk to Jim Burack, who is the town administrator and also the chief of police in Milliken, Colorado. And I was going to talk to him about the development of a community court in Milliken, but I thought, Jim, I would start first with a little bit about your personal journey, because I know that you used to be the counsel and director of operations at the Police Executive Research Forum, which is kind of a think tank that explores issues around police, police policy, and I wonder how you went from that role here in Washington, with a national perspective, to this more local perspective in Colorado.

JIM BURACK: You know, I spent, as you said, I spent six years at PERF here in Washington, D.C., and I had the opportunity to meet and to hear and spend time with a lot of the leading police researchers, leading police practitioners. So it was really an incomparable opportunity, and I was really fortunate to have that chance to see up close, to be able to visit some of these communities that have done great anti-crime initiatives and to be part of them as either a member of a consulting team, or a member of the research team.

But there gets to be a point where you're still an outsider that you want to actually be engaged with making something happen in the field. And so after a number of years at PERF it was clear to me that I wanted to get back into the field. I had been a police officer when I first got out of college. I was a patrol officer on the street outside of Denver and that's where I wanted to be. And that's actually been the plan since college—to be a police chief.

WOLF: Well tell me, then, how you began to think about creating a community court in

Milliken and what led you to that idea and what the process has been like to actually bring it to fruition.

BURACK: I think I have to go back years. I mean probably PERF was the formative, the formative period, but I spent a lot of time working on problem-oriented policing, and I had a chance to spend time with Herman Goldstein and Ron Clarke and practitioners, Chuck Wexler, who was my boss, and a number of folks who, if you're in the world of policing, mean a great deal. So I worked a lot on problem-oriented policing, community policing.

One of your colleagues from CCI, Julius Lang, came in and spoke at a problem-oriented policing conference. So it was clear to me at that point, listening to Julius, that community courts was the twin of problem-oriented policing, and that there were these synergies that can happen between policing and courts.

After a couple of years I had an opportunity to build a new police station. We're a very fast growing community in northern Colorado, and my county was one of the fastest growing counties in the country in the early 2000s. We went to the voters for a bond. The voters approved it, and I think early on I recognized I wanted to build a building which tried to incorporate all of these strands of police innovation: community policing, problem-oriented policing, CPTED or crime prevention through environmental design. And my impulse was "We need to build a courthouse into it." We talked through it. We were going to build a courthouse into it and figure out how we can make, at the municipal level, the very lowest levels of the criminal justice system, how we can get the police and courts to cooperate better. And that was the genesis of it.

WOLF: So it sounds like you're making a connection between the architecture of the space and the actual practical relationship the court system and the police have, or you hope that they will have.

BURACK: I think that's exactly correct. You put it better than I. I think that design has an impact. It sends a message both to the defendants and folks who are participating in the in the justice system at the local level, and it sends a clear message, I think, to the officers and participants that we believe in problem-solving and prevention.

The beauty of it is that you can design this, what's effectively a neighborhood-based police and court, for this clearly defined geographic area and deliver service on a personal retail basis, where there's a high level of accountability, a high level of knowledge by officers about the community and about the customers and the families and the businesses we serve.

So the question that I think our Milliken model leads to is whether or not there's some basis of suggesting that you could design or replicate neighborhood-based, decentralized community police stations twinned with a community court along, probably, with some sort of human service resource center, which is what we've added in our lobby of our police station. I think it's a theory worth trying.

WOLF: Well tell me a little bit about the architecture, then. Paint a picture then. What's it like?

BURACK: Well, I think if you're a visitor, the first thing that strikes you when you walk into our building, first of all, it's right downtown. The building overlooks our future town square. But when you walk in, you walk into a lobby with a children's library, with children's toys, with a fireplace, with rocking chairs.

You even walk in and next to the service counter for the police department, there are two chairs at the counter. And what it does, I think it changes the dynamic of that interaction between the visitor to the police station and our personnel behind the counter. Because it instantly suggests to a visitor, "Please sit down. Let's actually talk." I mean, you're not there to get a burger. You're there to sit down and talk out a problem. And I think it ties to this procedure of justice. It's not only how you're treated, it's those silent signals that the customer of justice services receives, that "I'm gonna be treated with dignity and respect, and be listened to, because my environment tells me that that's what's going to happen in this place."

We put a lot of glass on the outside of the courthouse. You want the court participants, you want the judge, you want the victim's family and the defendant's family to understand that there's a community beyond that glass, outside, that's being affected by that behavior that we're talking about in court. And we wanted to reflect a sense that we might to restorative justice in the courtroom, so we have a circular design in the center of the room so that if we do conferencing or, you know, healing circles, that there's some way that we reflect that tradition that we hope, at some point, to start.

WOLF: So tell me about introducing this idea of a community court and even some of the community policing ideas that you've brought to Milliken. Have you found any kind of culture clash or any challenges or obstacles?

BURACK: I'll make one observation, which may be counterintuitive, but it reinforces



itself from time to time. And that is when you explain these concepts to the layperson, they intuitively understand it. They intuitively say it's a good idea, and it makes sense to them. Curiously, when you explain concepts like this to folks who are the experts, the professionals, the folks who spent a lifetime in a silo, have a more difficult time—some of them—sort of bridging the silos because they're invested in a certain way of doing business. And community courts are a great example of trying to pull people out of those silos and out of those sorts of cultural norms of the profession we've grown up with.

WOLF: Great, well it's been a pleasure talking with you Jim. I've been speaking with Jim Burack who's the town administrator and also the chief of police of Milliken, Colorado. I'm Rob Wolf, director of communications at the Center for Court Innovation. To listen to more podcasts, visit our website at www.courtinnovation.org. Thanks for listening.
