

# Leading by Example: Blue Earth County Goes “Green” in Its New Justice Center and Jail

*By Jessica Beyer, Blue Earth County Communications Manager & Business Analyst, Mankato, Minnesota, and Connie Clem, Editor, National Jail Exchange, Longmont, Colorado*

The Blue Earth County Justice Center and Jail in Mankato, Minnesota, is a new, multipurpose facility created to update county services, increase jail capacity, and streamline criminal justice processes for the county. It was also the first “green” public construction project in the south-central part of the state.

The process of envisioning, planning, and constructing the facility took nearly 2 decades of careful consideration by county leaders, community stakeholders, and a multitude of constituents and consultants. The end result is a safe, operationally efficient, and secure facility that provides a future-oriented solution to the county’s need for jail space, court security, and accessibility for the public. The Blue Earth County Justice Center resides on a nearly 40-acre parcel. The building itself is 172,000 square feet in size and houses the sheriff’s office, county attorney, county jail, the probation department, and the courts.

Green building initiatives were an important component in the planning process. The county sought to ensure environmental stewardship through a facility that saves resources, utilizes fewer taxpayer dollars to operate, and keeps future generations in mind. Blue Earth County strived to lead by example in constructing the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified facility in south-central Minnesota. It is also the first LEED-certified jail in the state.

Community engagement was a vital aspect of the project—from involving citizen groups in the early planning stages to holding numerous public meetings to hosting a series of grand opening activities and tours. Reaction to the new facility has been overwhelmingly positive.



Altogether, the project in its entirety was highly successful as a result of the careful planning and consideration by those involved, especially the county's Justice Planning Steering Committee.

## The Facility Development Process

A timeline for the overall facility planning, design, development, construction, and transition process is provided in the sidebar. It illustrates the vast amount of consideration and expertise that went into planning the Blue Earth County Justice Center and Jail.

## Defining Objectives

Overall objectives for the Blue Earth County Justice Center project were:

- To meet present and future criminal justice system functional needs;
- To meet Minnesota state requirements and standards;
- To provide improved safety and security for inmates and staff;
- To allow for future jail expansion in a cost-effective manner; and
- To improve staffing efficiency through the use of technology.

Blue Earth County's strongest impetus for building a new jail was the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC)'s requirement to do so, based on 2003 findings that the existing jail was out of compliance with standards on staffing and provided inadequate separation of different types of inmates.

The county also needed more jail beds. Bed space was routinely an issue, and inmates were often being transported to other counties because capacity was at the maximum despite implementation of jail alternatives in the mid-2000s.

The county also wanted to address a number of inefficiencies with the existing Blue Earth County Law Enforcement Center.

- It was located in a downtown area of the community. For court appearances, inmates were being transported from the jail through residential areas to the courthouse about a mile away.
- Once at the courthouse, transport officers would bring inmates (shackled and in orange jumpsuits) through the public building to their court hearings. This posed many safety, security, and privacy concerns for the public and inmates.
- Probation and county attorney staff had to travel from other office locations to attend court proceedings.
- Moving county law enforcement offices out of downtown and nearer to major highway corridors would improve access to rural areas of the county and reduce emergency response times.

A state-of-the-art dispatch center and emergency management offices/space were also desired goals for the new Sheriff's Office.

Several locations were considered for the new construction, primarily expansions at the historic downtown courthouse or the existing law enforcement center, or new construction on agricultural land on the city outskirts (the "Greenfield" site). The Greenfield option would allow for geothermal energy savings and other LEED certification requirements to be part of the project.

The function of the facility also received careful thought. Blue Earth County worked early on with NIC to look at best-practice examples of jails and criminal justice systems regionally and across the nation. Through extensive research, community symposiums, and the work of consultants, it was determined that incorporating all criminal justice functions into one building along with the jail would best meet the needs of the county.

The Greenfield site ultimately was selected for constructing a new, multi-purpose facility. This decision gave the county ample room for future expansion of jail bed space, would reduce response times for law enforcement, and would better suit plans for a green facility with geothermal wells on the property. A "direct supervision" style of jail design was selected for use in the Justice Center for greater efficiency.

Everything about the Justice Center was planned with the future in mind. For the foreseeable future, it will not be necessary to build another new jail—the new facility was designed to allow for the addition of more housing units if the need arises.

## Managing Construction and Transition

Once it was clear to jail administrators that Blue Earth County would be constructing a jail, the county utilized NIC to train jail staff who would eventually become the Jail Transition Team. Jail administrators applied to have NIC come to Mankato to put on a 2-day program called HONI (How to Open a New Institution). The program helped educate the county commissioners, jail administrators, and jail staff on the many tasks involved in getting a new facility ready for operation. It helped open everyone's eyes to how much planning and development of policies and procedures was ahead for the team.

NIC also helped Blue Earth County to send four county personnel on tours of facilities outside Minnesota that had similar operating philosophies and designs. The trip helped the team to identify flaws in the initial design and avoid at least one costly mistake. Jail staff also gathered several new ideas for the operation of the inmate housing units.

<p><b>Early 1990s</b> Aware that the jail is crowded and functionality can be improved, Blue Earth County begins saving money for future jail needs.</p>	<p><b>1995</b> An annual jail inspection by the Minnesota DOC finds that the jail is "drastically" lacking in space for all auxiliary functions.</p>	<p><b>2001</b> NIC officials visit Blue Earth County to interview key players in the criminal justice system and hold a community meeting. It is recommended that Blue Earth County collect jail-use data and convene a Justice Planning Committee</p>	<p><b>2002</b> Justice Planning Committee convenes and includes citizens, justice officials from all aspects of the justice system. Their role is to monitor policies affecting jail population and analyze the overall justice system function.</p>
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A Justice Center Steering Committee, comprising staff from a variety of county departments and key contractors, met regularly throughout the entire process to work out the many details involved in the project. Having a team of highly involved staff and workers engaged in the project kept communication lines open and allowed for issues to be discussed and looked at from several viewpoints. It also was an important way to keep components of the project moving forward with accountability to the team. The committee met even more frequently during the transition and occupancy phase and while the various departments began moving into the facility.

Former Blue Earth County Administrator Dennis McCoy took an active role in the project, essentially acting as the county’s overall project manager for the entire facility. He visited the site regularly, often daily throughout the key construction phases. McCoy kept a log of on-site observations and issues that were reviewed at weekly meetings of the steering committee. Written agendas, minutes, and detailed notes on action items and reports from committee members on their individual focus areas provided structure and documentation to ensure follow-through for the project.

Sergeant Joslyn Peterson (now assistant jail administrator) was assigned nearly 6 months prior to construction to work full-time on transition planning for the jail portion of the facility. She was joined by two other team members as site work began. Early in the construction phase, the jail transition team moved to a trailer at the construction site to monitor progress. The transition team also began writing new procedural manuals for operating and staffing the facility.



The work of the transition team was key to the success of the project. Staff who were on-site were able to learn an enormous amount of information about the facility, including the mechanics of the building, how the electronics work, who the contractors were, and why certain decisions were made in order to accommodate future needs—to name just a few examples. It was especially important that the transition team had a good working relationship with the contractors and understood the details of what was happening on a daily basis with the project.

<p><b>2003</b> A consultant recommends the county develop an automated system for jail data and implement jail alternatives to reduce the demand for jail beds: electronic monitoring, a drug court, and an early case resolution program.</p>	<p><b>2003</b> An annual jail inspection by MN DOC finds the jail out of compliance with standards on appropriate separation of inmates and in need of additional staffing.</p>	<p><b>2003</b> County officials tour direct supervision jails across the state to learn more about housing practices. Officials determine a direct supervision style jail will be safer and more cost efficient to operate.</p>	<p><b>2004</b> A jail planning expert is retained to perform a facility assessment and develop a pre-architectural program.</p>
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NIC featured Blue Earth County—in particular, the work of its transition team—in its 2010 video, “New Jail Planning: Getting It Right.” The video gives examples of construction issues found by the transition team inspectors while they could be easily corrected. The team found crannies where inmates could have hidden contraband and noticed that some windows slated for installation did not meet Minnesota DOC size specifications. By catching these problems in advance, the transition team saved the county money and improved facility safety.

Managing the transition required an enormous amount of work in a short span of time. The team advises others who are planning new jails that it is never too early to start working on transition items.

Brian Shoemaker commented on his experience as a member of the transition team:

*Transition was a lot of work, and I am glad we had the team we had. Everyone brought their own level and area of expertise to the table. We began focusing on transition early on, and we still could have used more time to prepare.*

## Green Design

In addition to the facility’s functionality and robust technology, it is uniquely popular for its “green,” environmentally friendly design and its status as a LEED-certified facility. The new justice facility paved the way for the construction of a handful of other green facilities in the area, such as the new Rosa Parks Elementary School in Mankato and the Blue Earth and Nicollet County Humane Society Pet Shelter.

Green design was chosen not only to make a positive impact on public health and the environment but also to practice fiscal responsibility with taxpayer dollars. Facilities utilizing green technology have been proven to reduce operating costs, to increase occupant productivity, and to help create a sustainable community. Benchmarking indicates the Blue Earth justice facility is designed to perform at a rate that is 70 times greater than standard code requirements.

Blue Earth County did not hire additional staff members who would specialize in the green aspects of constructing the facility. It relied on contractors who had experience and knowledge with green technologies, and the county also chose to work with a consulting firm that specializes in LEED certification. The Justice Center Steering Committee worked on green building features in addition to its overall involvement in planning for the jail and criminal justice facility.

<p><b>2004</b> The Justice Planning Committee formally recommends that the county board consider a building plan that incorporates the jail, courts, probation, county attorney, and sheriff’s office in one facility.</p>	<p><b>2004</b> Officials consider multiple site options and building variations. They select agricultural land on the edge of the city rather than building on to the downtown courthouse or existing law enforcement center. A preliminary architectural design is developed.</p>	<p><b>2006</b> The county board authorizes negotiations for site purchase and awards a construction management contract.</p>	<p><b>2006</b> The County Board authorizes the site purchase and awards a contract to a consultant that specializes in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).</p>
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Blue Earth County will be taking part in an upcoming grant-funded project that will more extensively monitor and provide data on the building's performance. After 3 years of operation, it will be valuable to see how the building is meeting early performance benchmarks and just how many resources and tax dollars are being saved.



**2006**  
Construction documents are developed.

**2007**  
County officials solicit bids for facility construction and award a contract. The first transition team member is assigned in January. Site preparation is underway, and the formal groundbreaking is held in May. The rest of the transition team begins work in July.

**2008**  
Construction is underway. The transition team moves into a trailer on the construction site.

**2009**  
Construction is completed in the spring. Departments transition into the new facility. Jail inmates are the last to move in—in June..

## Green Features

The Justice Center obtained LEED certification through its ranking on a number of different elements in specific categories of construction and operation.

### I. Energy and Atmosphere

- Building Commissioning
  - Examples include testing of each system and product and extensive training for maintenance staff on operational procedures.
- Refrigerant Management
  - The Justice Center does not use HVAC systems and equipment containing CFCs or HCFCs.
- Energy Conservation Performance
  - The Justice Center utilizes 500 geothermal wells with bores 220 feet deep that heat and cool the entire facility.
  - Examples of other features in this category are high-performance windows and glazing, insulation, and high-efficiency equipment.
  - The facility is designed to save 32% of energy use and costs beyond code requirements each year.

### II. Water Efficiency

- Water-Efficient Landscaping
  - Use of climate-adapted grasses, trees, shrubs, and flowers saves about 375,000 gallons of irrigation water per year. This is enough water to cover 10.5 football fields with an inch of water. This represents a 100% reduction in use of potable water and a 61% reduction in total water applied for irrigation purposes.
- Water Use Reduction in Plumbing Fixtures
  - Installation of low-flow toilets, urinals, faucets, sinks, showerheads, and dishwashers is estimated to save 35% of water used in the building, or 246,163 gallons per year.

### III. Sustainable Sites

- Erosion and Sedimentation Control
  - A number of strategies were used to keep topsoil from leaving the site during construction to avoid contributing to air and water pollution.
- Alternative Transportation
  - The facility design encourages low carbon emission alternatives in transportation. Examples include preferred parking for low-emitting fuel efficient vehicles, bicycle racks, and shower rooms for those commuting by bicycle.

- Transport vehicles are no longer needed to move inmates between the jail and courtrooms across town.
- Development Footprint
  - Site disturbance and the development footprint were reduced by providing a contiguous, vegetated open-space area adjacent to the building that exceeds the building footprint. This preserves open space and provides potential habitat for wildlife and native plant species.
- Stormwater Management
  - The stormwater management plan promotes infiltration and captures and treats the stormwater runoff by using native plantings, grasses, and a stormwater retention pond, among other strategies.



#### IV. Materials and Resources

- Storage and Collection of Recyclables
- Use of Materials Containing Recycled Content
  - Ceramic tiles found in the building are made from more than 55% recycled glass.
- Local/Regional Materials
  - Limestone, a natural product found in the Blue Earth County/Mankato area, was used in the exterior and interior of the facility.
- Certified Wood

## V. Indoor Environmental Quality

- Indoor Air Quality and Ventilation
  - The facility has a no smoking policy.
  - The design and construction process incorporated indoor air quality (IAQ) management guidelines.
  - Low-emitting materials were used, and indoor pollutant control is maintained.
  - The facility design was completed with attention to thermal comfort.
- Energy Efficient Equipment and Appliances
  - Lighting controls are in place to save energy.
  - The building is designed for daylight illumination, without increasing cooling load due to unwanted solar gain. This is estimated to reduce lighting energy use by 50% to 80%.

## Public Engagement

In addition to working on planning, construction, and technology elements of the project, the county's team also focused on public engagement. Blue Earth County officials had witnessed other jail projects—often much-needed capital improvements—turn controversial when high tax levies were instituted to cover construction costs.

It had been clear for some time that a new jail would be needed. The county began saving for the project years in advance and was able to pay roughly three-quarters of the cost of the \$42 million facility up front. This was a huge advantage in getting public approval for the project, because taxpayers would not be burdened with higher property taxes. The only reason the entire cost of the facility wasn't covered by up-front savings was because of the decision to build a multi-functional facility rather than just a new jail.

Public engagement was crucial in successfully integrating a new jail and government facility into the community.



- Officials held informational public meetings at various stages in the project and gave presentations to numerous community groups. The county administrator, the sheriff, the chief deputy, jail leaders, the architect, the project manager, county commissioners, the public

information officer, and other staff attended the public meetings. The county administrator and staff from the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office gave presentations arranged through speakers' bureaus.

- The county administrator acted as the main spokesperson for the project and gave all the interviews with media throughout the project.
- Media representatives were escorted to the site periodically to get updates on the construction project. It was extremely important to work with the media to share the story of the project to continually keep the public informed regarding its status.
- A webcam link on the county's website was another way the county kept residents informed about construction progress.
- At project completion, the county hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony and special events for various groups. Grand opening tours were offered for several days.

The series of events at the grand opening was the most important piece of engaging the public. The events were intended to educate community members and the public in general on the overall project and to showcase the importance of the facility.

- Open house festivities kicked off with a staff open house, where employees could bring their families to show them the facility.
- Blue Earth County also hosted a special VIP event for community members, elected officials, and contractors who worked on the project. This event included a meal and program in the jail.
- Area law enforcement personnel also were invited for special tours prior to the formal ribbon-cutting.

The local newspaper created a special insert to the regular publication, timed to accompany the grand opening, which featured the new facility and the story behind the project. The insert also introduced the roles of the various agencies that make up the criminal justice system. Personnel from the sheriff's office, the county attorney, the probation department, dispatch, the jail, and the courts all gave interviews with the media and



provided content for the special insert to share information with the public on the parts of the criminal justice system and how they would function in the new facility. It was a fantastic educational opportunity and tool with benefits beyond simply publicizing the new building.

The official ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on May 15, 2009. The entire Minnesota Supreme Court attended the event, along with many other elected officials from throughout the region, state, and local area. Following the ceremony and for the next 5 days, staff and volunteers hosted educational tours of the facility during evening and weekend hours to give the public ample opportunity to see all its spaces before inmates moved into the jail in June. In just 5 days, nearly 5,000 people toured the facility.

Many groups toured the facility because of their specific interest in its LEED/“green” aspects. Some of these guests have been from counties that are in the planning stages of building a jail. For specific

green-related tour groups, we asked specialized contractors and experts in green technology to assist. The project architect even hosted, in cooperation with the county, a series of educational seminars about green building that showcased the facility for local contractors and other members of the public.



It was invaluable to have the public so engaged in the whole process. Inviting citizens to get an inside look at the facility was especially effective. People of all ages enjoy learning unusual facts about the jail and Justice Center, such as that there are 329 locks in the jail that need to be checked every week, and that the facility has 116 security cameras.

Sometimes building a jail can be controversial. However, in Blue Earth County public opinion was extremely positive. Three years after the jail opened, people are still very interested in the facility, and tours (now limited to certain parts of the building) continue to be given regularly.

## The Facility Today

The Justice Center will soon celebrate its third anniversary of being fully operational. The jail itself has 150 beds, with room to incorporate double-bunking to easily extend capacity to 203 inmates. Space is also slated in case additional expansion is needed in the future. Direct supervision is used in the largest housing unit, and other units are managed using remote observation. Central control, intake, program, kitchen, laundry, and nursing space are adjacent.

The new Justice Center allows a more streamlined process with all related departments in the same building. Jail inmates are now transported through a secure elevator from the jail to holding cells located just outside the courtrooms. Bailiffs can bring inmates into the courtrooms using a private entrance that avoids public interaction.

The Blue Earth County Justice Center and Jail continues to prove its worth as a facility that saves taxpayer dollars by enabling reductions in the use of operational and environmental resources. The county now has a safe, effective, and efficient justice facility that will serve its citizens well for many years. Everyone is proud of the fact that Blue Earth County has gone “green.”

## For More Information

*New Jail Planning: Getting It Right* (Videorecording). National Institute of Corrections, 2010. View this 20-minute video online or order a DVD copy at <http://nicic.gov/Library/024347>.

U.S. Green Building Council — <http://www.usgbc.org>

The *Mankato Free Press* newspaper published a series of articles on Blue Earth County jail planning, construction, and transition that can be accessed online at <http://mankatofreepress.com>.

This document is available at:

[http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national\\_jail\\_exchange/archive/2012/06/13/leading-by-example-blue-earth-county-goes-green-in-its-new-justice-center-and-jail.aspx](http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/06/13/leading-by-example-blue-earth-county-goes-green-in-its-new-justice-center-and-jail.aspx)

*The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.*

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