



August 5, 2016

For immediate release

City shares additional information on City Hall health concerns

As City of Independence staff work through the process to temporarily moving operations out of City Hall due to health and safety concerns in the building, city leaders have provided additional information regarding the issues that prompted the relocation.

At the July 28 meeting of the Independence City Commission, commissioners were briefed on recent documented complaints of employee illnesses believed to be related to their working environment in City Hall. Commissioners also learned that the city's designated primary care physician and legal counsel handling personnel matters both had recommended that staff be expediently vacated from the building to prevent additional exposure to suspect working conditions. Acting out of concern for the health and safety of employees and citizens, the commissioners, in a unanimous vote, then authorized the temporary relocation of city operations.

This week, city leaders received more specific information regarding the types of health concerns that have been identified through medical testing. Independence City Manager Micky Webb explained that employees filing complaints underwent RAST (radioallergosorbent) mold profile testing to identify the substances potentially causing their illnesses. As a result, the employees tested positive for six mold strains, Webb said.

Webb further explained the mold exposure is believed to have occurred within City Hall because the employees developed symptoms while in the building, but the symptoms resolved after a period of time outside of the building. Additionally, he said, untested mold growth is visible on multiple surfaces in the building's interior, including on walls, air conditioning units, air vents and other areas.

In evaluating the safety of the facility, Webb said, a professional environmental consulting company has been engaged. After an on-site inspection, a company representative concurred with the decision to vacate the premises.

"The environmental consultants have advised the city that relocation of City Hall services will provide the safest alternative to protect employee health and to minimize public exposure," Webb said.

"We know we have a problem, which has now been confirmed through medical testing and the evaluation by environmental consultants," Webb said. "However, we don't yet know the entire scope of the problem. Therefore, we are taking every precaution to avoid future health risks to our employees and our citizens who do business at City Hall."

Over the next several days, city departments will relocate operations to temporary quarters in the former Mercy Hospital facility ("Building D") at 811 W. Laurel. The Independence Police Department, currently located in the basement of City Hall, will be the first department to move, followed by other city services in a phased process. All departments currently housed at City Hall are expected to be operational in Building D by August 12, Webb said, with the exception of the 911 dispatch center, which will transition to a mobile unit outside of City Hall for the next several weeks to allow time for installation of a new 911 communications system at the Laurel Street

location. Webb emphasized that there will be no disruption of any emergency services during the relocation process.

All other departments within City Hall will be closed Wednesday and Thursday, August 10 and 11, to allow staff to complete the relocation. The regular city commission meeting scheduled for Thursday, August 11, will be conducted as scheduled.

Once City Hall is vacated, Webb said, city leaders and commissioners will evaluate the next steps. He noted the city's legal counsel advises the city engage an environmental consultant to help address next steps related to the building concerns.

As the relocation plan continues to develop, Webb said, more detailed information will be shared with the community on how to access city departments, as well as information on the status of the City Hall building. Citizens are encouraged to continue to watch local newspapers and frequently visit the city's Facebook page – **facebook.com/IndependenceKS** - and website - **independenceks.gov** - for developing information.

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UPDATED
August 5, 2016

INDEPENDENCE CITY HALL TEMPORARY RELOCATION

With recent reports of health and safety concerns at City Hall, the Independence City Commission has authorized the temporary relocation of all personnel and operations. For the next few weeks, city staff will be working to complete a phased process of relocating all departments to the former Mercy Hospital property at 811 W. Laurel. We understand that you likely have questions about this unexpected development and how it impacts our community. Therefore, we have assembled the list of questions and answers below. We want to be sure you are fully informed as the relocation process evolves, so please check back frequently for updates to this information. Thank you sincerely for your patience and understanding!

Q: What was the type of mold found to have caused the health issue?

A: We don't know for sure, but employees tested positive for 6 mold strains.

Q: What were the tests performed by the doctor to determine the type of mold that caused health issues with current employees?

A: A RAST mold profile was performed. A radioallergosorbent test (RAST) is a blood test used to determine what substances the patient is allergic to.

Q: Since testing of the work environment was not conducted, how was it determined that the health issue was caused by the work environment?

A: The employees developed symptoms while in the building, and the symptoms would resolve when the employees were away from City Hall. We know we have mold, as (untested) mold growth is visible on multiple surfaces in the building's interior, including on walls, air conditioning units, air vents, etc.

Q: Without testing the total area of City Hall, how is it known that toxic or hazardous mold is throughout the facility?

A: We only know we have a problem, not the entire scope of the problem. We engaged environmental consultants who recommended that we vacate the premises. Since then, a consultant has been on site and concurs with the decision to vacate the building.



UPDATED
August 1, 2016

INDEPENDENCE CITY HALL TEMPORARY RELOCATION

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Q: What are the specific health concerns at City Hall?

A: We have yet to undertake a professional evaluation of the facility to identify the exact environmental issues present. We do know the building, which is 100 years old, has experienced multiple maintenance problems over time, including water damage due to extreme weather and plumbing breaks. The decision to relocate staff at this time is based on the advice of medical and legal professionals in light of illnesses reported by several employees.

Q: Hasn't the City been aware of health concerns at City Hall for several years?

A: It was only last week that the city received its first officially documented employee complaints related to illnesses those employees believed to be linked to their work environment, resulting in the filing of workman's compensation claims.

Q: Is the City facing legal action related to these co-worker illnesses?

A: Personnel matters, of course, are confidential. However, it should be clearly noted that our first and foremost concern is avoiding potential health risks to our employees and citizens who conduct business at City Hall. Therefore, we are taking precautions now to be sure we provide a safe working environment and avoid any future health concerns.

Legal liabilities are secondary, but certainly also must be considered, as taxpayer dollars are required for any City expenditure, including costs associated with handling legal matters.

Q: Is it safe to be in the City Hall building?

A: The safety of our employees and citizens is our top priority. We do not believe there is any immediate danger. For citizens who are conducting occasional or routine transactions at City Hall (i.e., paying a water bill), there is no need to be concerned about entering the building, and we encourage you to conduct your business as usual until the departments are relocated from the building.

For staff who work daily in the building, we are relocating operations out of an abundance of caution to avoid any potential health risks and to allow us to thoroughly and professionally evaluate the facility and determine next steps.

Q: What if I am not comfortable entering the building?

A: CITIZENS: Individuals who prefer not to enter the building for business transactions may choose one of the following alternative options:

- Use the drive-up payment drop box located on Myrtle Street on the north side of City Hall. This option is available 24/7 and City Hall staff will continue to monitor the box every day. Please place separate payments in separate sealed envelopes.
- Pay your bill or request information online at www.independences.gov.
- Make a payment or request information by phone, **620-332-2500**.

EMPLOYEES: Alternative office accommodations will be offered immediately for any employees who have concerns about working in the City Hall building until the time their department is relocated.

Q: When will the relocation be completed?

A: It will be a phased process over the next few weeks, but we hope to have most departments moved and operational in the new temporary location by mid-August.

The Independence Police Department, currently located in the City Hall basement, will be the first to relocate. While officers and detectives will move to Building D immediately, the 911 dispatch center initially will be relocated into a mobile unit outside of City Hall while the necessary emergency communications systems are installed in Building D. **THERE WILL BE NO DISRUPTION OF 911 EMERGENCY DISPATCH SERVICE** and the dispatch center will be accessible to the public.

Q: How will I access City departments after the relocation?

A: Information will be shared frequently with the community via multiple media channels, including:

- Local newspapers - the Independence Daily Reporter and Montgomery County Chronicle
- The City's website – independences.gov
- The City's Facebook page – www.facebook.com/independences

We encourage citizens to check these sites often as the process develops.

Q: Did the city explore any other options besides Building D for relocation?

A: Yes. Memorial Hall was explored as an option, but it lacks the necessary information technology (IT) network for the operation of the City's computer systems and would require significant investment.

Reasons for selecting Building D for relocation include:

- The facility is already owned by the City.
- The directive from the City Commission requires all City departments to relocate, and the former hospital property offers sufficient space for all services in one location. There is no other available facility in the community that would allow all departments to relocate together.
- The relocation needed to be implemented quickly, and Building D is readily available and accessible with relatively minimal need for renovation to function as a temporary City Hall.
- A sufficient IT network is in place in Building D to accommodate the City's computer systems.

Q: How will the costs associated with this temporary relocation (utilities in Building D, retrofitting spaces in the building, moving, etc.) affect the City's budget?

A: It is yet to be determined what actual utility costs will be in the new location now that approximately half of the former hospital facility has been removed and now that City departments will be operating in Building D.

While we do understand that the cost of the temporary relocation will be significant, we are working to minimize the expense at every opportunity. Only equipment and furnishings necessary to safely and effectively operate our departments and serve the community will be relocated at this time. In addition, whenever possible, we will engage local providers for any professional services needed to accomplish the relocation.

Certainly, the cost of this process is a very important consideration for the City. It is, however, secondary to our concern for the health of our employees and citizens.

Q: Hasn't the city had money specifically budgeted for making repairs to City Hall for several years that has not been used?

A: Routine building maintenance has been conducted and minor building repairs have been completed as needed over the years.

In August 2015, the City Commission did authorize City staff to develop a plan for a "scope of work" to include several major projects at City Hall. These included improvements to the drainage system and the building entrance; roof repairs; electrical and generator upgrades. When such a "scope of work" is authorized, next steps require the development of architectural plans and cost estimates. While this information was being developed, the donation of the Mercy Hospital facility was proposed, and subsequently accepted by the commission in December 2015.

With that new development, the initially authorized scope of work was put on hold to allow the commission time to work through its intended process to evaluate all the feasible options for the future of City Hall. The postponement was an effort to conserve taxpayer dollars and avoid major investment at the current facility that might be viewed as wasted if, in fact, a different direction for City Hall was identified in the near future.

Q: How will the temporary location impact the work of the citizen advisory committee being formed to explore future City Hall options?

A: Since the focus for the next few weeks will be on the relocation project, we will have to step back and re-evaluate how this new course will affect the work of the citizen's committee assembled to evaluate future City Hall options. Again, this is a temporary solution, so we do expect we will still need a thorough evaluation with citizen input.

Q: How long will the relocation last?

A: It's important to note that the relocation to the former Mercy Hospital facility ("Building D") is a temporary solution until we can thoroughly evaluate the situation at City Hall and determine next steps.