

SMU seeks larger, more modern facility



This is how the exterior of the proposed Shawano Municipal Utilities building is expected to look once it's complete.

CONTRIBUTED

State approval needed to construct new \$12.6M building

By **KEVIN MURPHY**
Correspondent

Shawano Municipal Utilities has outgrown its service center and wants to replace it with larger modern facility.

"I've been here 18 years," said Rob Koepp, electrical supervisor and engineer, "and we've talked about (a new building) on and off that whole time."

A 2017 space study concluded that new construction and not remodeling would be best option to provide SMU with more functional and efficient facilities.

This week, SMU submitted plans to the Wisconsin Public Service Commission seeking authorization to construct the estimated \$12.6 million project.

PSC approval would mean demolition of the 21,000-square-foot structure at 122 N. Sawyer St. and 213 E. Green Bay St. and then construction of a 29,000-square-foot replacement building.

Although SMU has acquired adjacent properties over the years, its 2.45-

acre site isn't large enough to accommodate both buildings simultaneously. So, SMU would set up temporary offices in town while the new building is built, Koepp said.

A site won't be selected for the temporary offices until the PSC's four-to-six-month approval process is closer to completion.

SMU has two sheds off Fifth Street where the equipment and materials would be stored and the crew would work out of, Koepp said.

SMU has committed to remaining downtown to support revitalization of the underused East Green Bay Street corridor. No similar sized site is available downtown, and the nearest acceptable site would likely be several miles from the center of the city. That wouldn't be convenient to the hundreds of customer visits that occur monthly, according to SMU's construction application submitted to the PSC.

"Also, relocation would likely result in leaving a vacant brownfield site for a new greenfield development, which is not an environmentally positive outcome," according to the application.

The building was constructed in the 1930s as a fire station and public works shops. SMU moved in in the 1980s and expanded the structure to its current size.

The service center is showing its age with roofs, windows, doors and pavement in need of replacement in order to continue to use the building.

Public offices are on the second floor, which isn't considered a desirable location. Also, the building was remodeled without present-day concerns for employee security, Koepp said.

"We haven't had any issues, but we do make people mad when their service is disconnected and we get some disgruntled people here," he said.

The employee kitchen is the only area large enough to accommodate SMU Commission meetings, and there isn't an area large enough to hold all the staff for training sessions. Employee bathrooms also require extensive remodeling, according to the application.

Field staff locker room, restroom, and break rooms were always cramped for space.

SMU's vehicle fleet has outgrown its current facilities, requiring many "front line" trucks, trailers and materials to be stored outdoors.

The new service center would provide space for indoor vehicle storage and adequate accommodations for employee and public needs.

A rooftop solar array is in the plans as well as a geothermal heating system with some lines extending 150 feet

deep to heat and cool the offices.

Aesthetic landscaping and improved storm water management for the site are also in the plans.

Miron Construction estimated the building's cost at \$12.6 million but the actual price won't be known until the project is bid, Koepp said.

Construction would be financed by utility revenue bonds which would be paid off by a 5.35% increase in rates, according to an estimate calculated by SMU Manager Brian Knapp.

SMU currently has an electric rate increase before the PSC. Financing the building project would be addressed in a subsequent rate case, probably within two or three years, Koepp said.

The project's timetable tentatively calls for construction to begin next year and occupancy about 18 months later.

The modern facilities are expected to be appreciated by the employees and public, Koepp said.

"We haven't had much trouble retaining office staff ... with many being here for several years. Our turnover comes in the line department. The vehicles they work out of are newer but our facilities, especially downstairs, are bad. Anything we can do to make them feel that this is a good place to work helps our retention rate," Koepp said.