

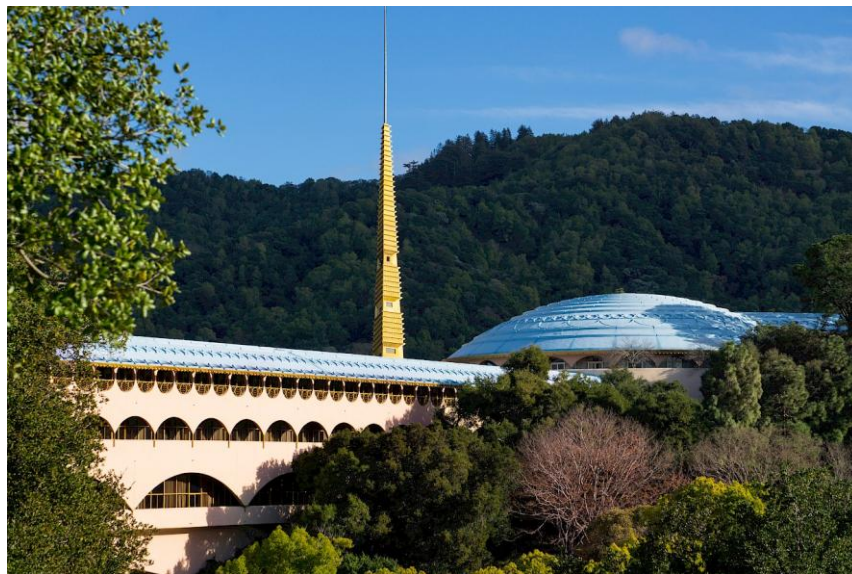
# The Marin County Civic Center — In Need of Love

## June 4, 2026

### SUMMARY

Everyone loves the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Marin County Civic Center — from the freeway. Inside, however, it is clearly in need of love after decades of deferred maintenance. The Grand Jury finds that maintenance and rehabilitation of the Civic Center have generally been reactive rather than guided by a long-term, prioritized plan, and that security improvements have not been consistently addressed. The Civic Center holds a unique place in architectural history and in the hearts of Marin County residents. With a new County governance structure and leadership in place, now is the time to assess the Civic Center Campus’s current and future needs and uses.

The Civic Center is a world-renowned yet aging public asset that requires comprehensive planning and investment to ensure safe, functional, and sustainable operations while preserving its historic character. County departments have begun work to address shortcomings in planning, fragmented systems, and deferred maintenance costs. But more needs to be done. The Marin Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors and the Office of the County Executive take steps to assess the Civic Center Campus and formulate a stewardship road map — including a thorough Conditions and Uses Assessment and a new long-term commission advocating for the building and campus.



**Figure 01.** Marin County Civic Center.

Source: Marin County Department of Public Works.

## Glossary

**Civic Center Campus, or Campus:** When we refer to the Campus, we include the Post Office, the Administration Building, the Hall of Justice, the Veteran’s Memorial Auditorium, and the Exhibit Hall, plus the lagoon, walking paths and landscaped lawns that surround the main structures. Of these structures, only the Administration Building, the Hall of Justice and the Post Office were designed by Wright.<sup>1</sup>

**Civic Center:** The Administration Building and the Hall of Justice.

**Conservancy:** The Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center Conservancy was created as a commission in 1994 “to advise and assist the Board of Supervisors in the conservancy of the principal architectural values of the Civic Center buildings so that they are preserved and maintained in a manner which is consistent with their acknowledged status as architectural masterpieces.”<sup>2</sup>

**DPW:** The Marin County Department of Public Works.

**Gensler Report:** County of Marin Facilities Master Plan Report, April 2002.<sup>3</sup>

**KPMG Report:** Organizational Excellence Report of the Department of Public Works, approved November 2025.<sup>4</sup>

**Design Guidelines:** The Marin County Civic Center Master Design Guidelines produced by Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey, 2005.<sup>5</sup>

**OCE:** The Marin County Office of the County Executive.

**SOIS:** The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.<sup>6</sup>

**WBDA:** The Government Services Administration’s Whole Building Design Approach.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Only those buildings and eighty-one acres of the larger site are designated as a National Historic Landmark. The California Historical Landmark designation focuses on the Administration Building and the Hall of Justice as the primary historic resources.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Christman, *Conceptual Approval of the Establishment of a Civic Center Preservation Fund & Certain Changes to the Civic Conservancy Commission and Appointment of One Member of the Board to Serve as a Member of the Non-Profit Board of Directors* (letter to the Board of Supervisors, Oct. 10, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Gensler, *County of Marin Facilities Master Plan Report*, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> KPMG, *Organizational Excellence Report of the Department of Public Works*, November 2025, [https://marin.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view\\_id=33&clip\\_id=12811&meta\\_id=1408285](https://marin.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=33&clip_id=12811&meta_id=1408285) (accessed 4/27/2026).

<sup>5</sup> Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey, *The Marin County Civic Center Master Design Guidelines* (Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey, Dec. 20, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Secretary of the Interior, *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring & Reconstructing Historic Buildings* (Department of the Interior (DOI), 2017), <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/secretary-standards-treatment-historic-properties.htm> (accessed 3/15/2026).

<sup>7</sup> National Institute of Building Sciences, “The Integrated Design Approach,” *Whole Building Design and the WBDG®*, 2025, <https://www.wbdg.org/whole-building-design> (accessed 3/8/2026).

## **BACKGROUND — THE CIVIC CENTER**

The Marin County Civic Center is an iconic landmark visited by tourists from around the world and has served as the center of Marin County’s government for six decades. Once a symbol of a future characterized by a transparent government serving the people, it is now tired and in need of both long overdue maintenance and a refresh.

The Civic Center is the only government building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright that was actually constructed. The structure features distinctive blue roofs, glass walls, scalloped balconies, and an iconic gold spire. It is designed to blend seamlessly into the three hills it sits on. Its openness reflects Wright’s view that government should be transparent and accessible to the community at large. The building is cherished as a remarkable architectural achievement in a beautiful setting. Comments from visitors praise the sunlight beaming in from the skylights, the indoor gardens in the atrium, the repeating curvilinear and circular touches, the stunning blue fountain pool and surrounding patio with spectacular views, and the welcoming round, skylighted Library at the top.

The Civic Center building has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and designated a National Historic Landmark since 1991. It is also a California Historical Landmark. These statuses bring with them a certain amount of regulatory burden. When proposing any changes to the structure, alterations must (1) follow the Secretary of the Interior’s *Standards for Treatment of Historic Properties (SOIS)*; (2) retain character-defining features; and (3) minimize demolition or removal.<sup>8</sup>

## **APPROACH**

The Grand Jury performed interviews, reviewed planning and budget documents, and reviewed previously published material concerning the Civic Center Campus. We have expressly limited most of our inquiry to the Civic Center building itself, but recognize that any comprehensive study of the building would likely need to include all of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed buildings and presumably, the rest of the Campus. As part of this investigation, the Grand Jury interviewed management and staff knowledgeable about the matters discussed in this report, including representatives from:

- The Board of Supervisors
- The Department of Public Works
- The Civic Center Conservancy
- The Department of Cultural Services
- The Office of the County Executive
- The Facilities Maintenance Division of the Department of Public Works
- The Parks Department

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<sup>8</sup> See fn. 6.

This report is based, to a large extent, upon numerous and detailed interviews with many County employees who are knowledgeable about the building and the Campus. We greatly appreciate the time and thoughtfulness of the individuals we interviewed.

Our interview methodology incorporated the principles of “Appreciative Inquiry”, a technique that emphasizes positive aspects before addressing areas for improvement. We began each session by inviting participants to share what they valued most about the building and Campus, rather than focusing solely on flaws, which tend to come up organically.

We referred to the federal Government Services Administration (GSA) [Whole Building Design Approach](#) (WBDA) as a framework for assessing the current building’s condition and thinking about its future (Figure 02). Whole Building Design provides the strategies to achieve a true high-performance building: one that is cost-effective, safe, secure, accessible, flexible, aesthetic, productive, and sustainable over its entire life cycle.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 02.** Relationship of building components to High Performance Buildings.  
Source: National Institute of Building Sciences.

<sup>9</sup> National Institute of Building Sciences, “The Integrated Design Approach,” *Whole Building Design and the WBDG®*.

## DISCUSSION

### The Civic Center Building

The Civic Center is the seat of Marin County government and justice. It houses the Marin County Superior Court and most County government departments. It comprises 470,000 square feet, of which ~300,000 is office space in the Hall of Justice and ~150,000 is office space in the Administration Building. These buildings together house roughly a thousand employees and welcome the public daily for government interaction and tourism. This architectural heritage site is now beset by deferred maintenance, poor planning, and fragmented systems. The Grand Jury believes it is helpful to understand past practices that led to these issues before addressing the current status of the building.

*“Beautiful buildings are more than scientific. They are true organisms, spiritually conceived; works of art, using the best technology by inspiration rather than by idiosyncrasies of mere taste or any averaging by the committee mind.”*  
— Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>10</sup>

### Civic Center Campus Responsibilities

Marin County’s Civic Center Campus is a complex system of buildings, departments, responsibilities, and stakeholders. Although the celebrated Civic Center building serves as the Campus centerpiece, it represents just one building on the larger Campus that requires coordinated oversight and specialized expertise across several County departments and organizations.

- The Department of Public Works is responsible for maintaining the Civic Center in addition to 65 other County buildings, with oversight of all new construction, restoration efforts, and modifications to any County building. Within the DPW, the Facilities Maintenance Division (custodial, building maintenance, and receiving) has 45 people on its staff (with 7 vacant positions, most of which are in building maintenance). These employees are similarly responsible for maintaining all County buildings.
- The Parks Department manages landscape design and maintenance, integrated pest management, vegetation, exterior furniture, and the playground on the Campus, in addition to managing all other County parks and open space.
- The Department of Cultural Services oversees programming at the Veterans’ Memorial Auditorium, Exhibit Hall, Showcase Theater, meeting rooms, and the Marin County Fairgrounds. It also curates Campus art galleries, supports local arts organizations, manages Civic Center docent tours, and serves as County staff liaison for the Conservancy.
- The Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center Conservancy is a County commission originally created to raise funds for preservation and restoration of the Administration Building/Hall of Justice complex and grounds. The five Conservancy Board members appointed by the Board of Supervisors have responsibility to “advise the Board of Supervisors regarding

<sup>10</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography* (Pomegranate, 2005), p. 65.

the maintenance of the Civic Center complex consistent with the Civic Center’s status as a National and State Historic Landmark, and to review projects which would affect the appearance of the Civic Center.”<sup>11</sup> County staff present projects to the Conservancy for input when appropriate, and although its role is advisory, its feedback is generally utilized to inform staff recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

## **Past Planning Efforts**

The Civic Center has been the subject of a number of past studies, an ordinance, and Grand Jury Reports in 2002 and 2004.<sup>12</sup> Some of the recommendations and suggestions in past reports have been implemented, but many have not. Some of the studies, such as the Design Guidelines noted below, are still in use despite being over twenty years old. The Civic Center Open Space Ordinance remains legally binding insofar as it relates to new construction projects. Some efforts to bolster the Campus, such as the Renaissance Partnership, have simply faded from view.

The most important efforts and studies that we found are briefly summarized below. The costs and effort expended to create these studies, and the unfortunate lack of enduring recognizable impact therefrom, is a primary reason we recommend an ongoing commission, with members advocating for the Civic Center Campus, who can serve as long-term stewards.

## **Marin Civic Center Open Space Ordinance**

Enacted in 1992, the Open Space Ordinance (1992) prevents construction of any building on the Civic Center grounds, as defined therein, without the prior approval by a majority vote of the County electorate.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Marin Center Renaissance Partnership**

The Marin Center Renaissance Partnership, a public-private partnership, was formed in 2000, “to complete the vision of creating a cultural center complex on the Marin Center site,”<sup>14</sup> but is apparently no longer active.

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<sup>11</sup> Libby Garrison, *Civic Center Conservancy* (2024)

<https://apps.marincounty.gov/BosBoardsCommissions/BoardPage.aspx?BrdId=13&return=search.aspx>. (accessed 3/8/2026).

<sup>12</sup> Marin Civil Grand Jury, *Marin Civic Center: A Security Challenge* (May 24, 2002); *Civic Center Security Revisited* (June 8, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Marin County Board Of Supervisors Resolution on September 16, 2025 includes the following reference to the 1992 Marin Civic Center Open Space Ordinance: “WHEREAS, a county voter initiative from 1992, the ‘Marin Civic Center Open Space Ordinance’ was passed with the intent to preserve the aesthetic quality of the Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center buildings and grounds and requires an approval by a majority vote of the County electorate prior to construction of any building over 250 square feet within the ‘Civic Center Grounds.’ ” See [https://marin.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view\\_id=53&event\\_id=4063&meta\\_id=1398482](https://marin.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=53&event_id=4063&meta_id=1398482) (accessed 4/8/2026).

<sup>14</sup> Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey, *The Marin County Civic Center Master Design Guidelines*, p. 74.

## **The Gensler Report**

In 2001, the County retained Gensler, a global architectural, design and planning firm, to develop a comprehensive master plan to address the use of the Marin County Civic Center and other County facilities for the ensuing ten years. This 108-page report demonstrates a significant effort and extensive thought about Marin County’s facilities.<sup>15</sup>

## **Earlier Civil Grand Jury Reports**

The 2001–2002 Marin County Civil Grand Jury produced a report titled “Marin Civic Center: A Security Challenge,” and the 2003–2004 Grand Jury produced a follow-up report titled “Civic Center Security Revisited.”<sup>16</sup> Although a number of the recommendations in these reports were implemented for the courts floor of the Hall of Justice, we believe the security of the Civic Center as a whole is still deficient.

## **The Design Guidelines**

The 102-page *Design Guidelines for the Civic Center* was originally produced in 2005,<sup>17</sup> and these guidelines have not been updated since. This document focuses on how to assess and select sites for projects in the future, and implement those projects in a manner consistent with the principles required by Historic Landmark status.

## **2003 State Courts Study**

Marin County’s courthouse is unusual, in that it is housed within the same structure as the County administrative building. California court facilities are overseen by the state. A study by Mark Cavagnero Associates and overseen by a Marin County Court Facilities Master Plan Steering Committee, considered and recommended development of a separate courts building on the Campus.<sup>18</sup> No relocation plan for the courts housed in the Civic Center was ever implemented.

## **Assessing the Civic Center In 2026**

Although there are several studies to build on, there is currently no coherent vision for the future of the Civic Center Campus. Aside from the infrastructure issues mentioned below that result in part from deferred maintenance, the Civic Center presents other challenges that relate primarily to its design. In assessing the Civic Center now and into the future, the Grand Jury kept in mind the WBDA framework while acknowledging that a historic structure built nearly 70 years ago will never easily meet all the criteria, especially given the Civic Center’s design quirks.

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<sup>15</sup> Gensler, *County of Marin Facilities Master Plan Report*.

<sup>16</sup> See fn. 12.

<sup>17</sup> See fn. 5.

<sup>18</sup> As referenced in the *Design Guidelines for the Civic Center*, pages 70–71, see fn. 5.

## **Stakeholder Issues**

In the previous paragraphs we have mentioned the various stakeholders that help to manage the Civic Center. These include the Department of Public Works (and its Facilities Maintenance Division), the Parks Department, the Department of Cultural Services, and the Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center Conservancy. Issues found while investigating each stakeholder are outlined below, but all had one overarching theme: lack of funding.

Seven Facilities Project Managers within DPW currently juggle between 50 and 100 projects across all County buildings at any given time. According to a presentation<sup>19</sup> at a recent Board of Supervisors meeting, the consulting firm KPMG found that the absence of consistent workload tracking and performance measurement and integrated systems hinders staffing and resource allocation. In some cases, divisions plan and manage projects independently, contributing to a sense that the department reacts to issues rather than planning for them strategically. In response to this and other recommendations, the Board of Supervisors recently approved the hiring of three new Facilities Project Managers, for a total of ten.<sup>20</sup>

The Facilities Maintenance Division within DPW has a budget of only \$13.5 million a year and has underspent its budget for the last three fiscal years, due largely to unfilled positions within building maintenance. Perhaps not surprisingly given this situation, the staff has operated in the past several decades in an entirely reactive mode. For example, we have been told that some of the older equipment in the Civic Center has not been serviced at the manufacturer's recommended intervals because the Facilities Maintenance Division lacks the personnel and funds to do so. Electrical and other equipment serving the Civic Center is antiquated at worst, and has been replaced piecemeal at best.

A lack of clarity about responsibility for specific work areas at the Civic Center has frequently led to delays in needed work, including the removal of dangerous trees and the construction or maintenance of pedestrian pathways. Several years ago, representatives from the Parks Department began meeting with representatives from DPW, the office of the County Administrator (now OCE), Cultural Services, and the Board of Supervisors, forming a Civic Center Campus Improvement Working Group. The first several years of this effort were "triage," addressing safety issues and other urgent items, but under the leadership of the OCE, a Memorandum of Understanding was executed in October 2025 that identifies the roles and responsibilities of each department on the Campus.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Josh Swedberg, *Organizational Excellence Report of the Department of Public Works (DPW)* (prepared by KPMG), agenda item #8, Board of Supervisors meeting November 18, 2025, [https://marin.granicus.com/Viewer.php?view\\_id=33&clip\\_id=12811&meta\\_id=1408993](https://marin.granicus.com/Viewer.php?view_id=33&clip_id=12811&meta_id=1408993) (accessed 3/8/2026).

<sup>20</sup> Board of Supervisors, Agenda Item CB-8f, March 10, 2026.

<sup>21</sup> Marin County Department of Cultural Services, Marin County Department of Public Works, and Marin County Parks, *MOU between Marin County Department of Cultural Services, Marin County Department of Public Works, and Marin County Parks*, MOU (Marin County, 2025).

The Civic Center Conservancy’s original purpose was “to raise funds, to preserve and restore the Administration Building/Hall of Justice complex including landscaped grounds.”<sup>22</sup> Although stated as part of the Conservancy’s original mission, we are not aware that the Conservancy has undertaken any fundraising on behalf of the Civic Center in recent years, if ever.

### **Safety and Security Issues**

Frank Lloyd Wright’s vision of open and transparent interaction between government and citizens has always been aspirational. In today’s world, building security is as important as transparency and unlimited access. Not everyone coming to the Civic Center is there for positive reasons; people can be angry, frustrated, and disappointed when it comes to government matters. Over the years, there have been instances of theft, angry constituents entering unauthorized spaces, and unwanted visitors to the building. There is a natural tension between having an open and transparent space and having a secure building in a modern society that has threats that Wright never foresaw.

According to a report by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, more than 18 percent of local officeholders surveyed experienced threats or attacks in the 18 months prior to its 2023 study, and the number grew to more than 52 percent when insults and harassment were included.<sup>23</sup>

Marin County Administrative Regulation 14 states that “All persons and their possessions entering either [the Administration Building and Hall of Justice] are subject to search, either by metal detector and/or physical search. Any person refusing to be searched will be refused entry.” In practice, however, there is no constant monitoring of people coming and going in the Civic Center, except for the Court floor.<sup>24</sup>

The Court floor has security staffed by Sheriff’s deputies, and the single point of public entry on that floor requires passing through metal detectors and being subject to searches. The rest of the Civic Center has three points of entry for the general public, with no security screening.

At least since 2023, County buildings including the Civic Center have been staffed by uniformed security provided by Barbier Security Group. Recent recommendations for an expansion of the contract with Barbier state that the contract supports “the Countywide goal of providing safe, accessible and welcoming facilities for all constituents and employees,” and asks for additional Barbier hours to cover after-hours events. The Grand Jury understands that the Barbier security guards are present and walk around the Campus during each shift, but that means that the only visible security station for the building, the kiosk at the South entrance to the Administration Building, is usually not staffed. We note that the summary of the contract approved by the Board of Supervisors on September 30, 2025 stated that, in addition to other metrics, performance

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<sup>22</sup> See fn. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Brennan Center for Justice, *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders*, 2023, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> County of Marin, *Administrative Regulation 14, Building Security*, July 1, 1990, <https://www.marincounty.gov/departments/executive/budget-and-priority-setting/administrative-regulations/administrative-regulation-14> (accessed April 27, 2026).

would be measured by “response times averaging less than 10 minutes or [fewer] to incidents.”<sup>25</sup> If this is the expectation, we feel that security at the building can and should be improved.

Security at the courts is an issue that has been raised and examined in the past, by Civil Grand Juries in 2002 and 2004<sup>26</sup> and in some of the planning studies we reviewed. The Grand Jury does not have jurisdiction over the Courts which are run by the state.

## Workplace Shortcomings

From our interviews, it appears that County employees who work at 1600 Los Gamos Drive, the more modern building where the Marin County Sheriff and other departments are now located, are far more enthusiastic about their workplaces than those working at the Civic Center.



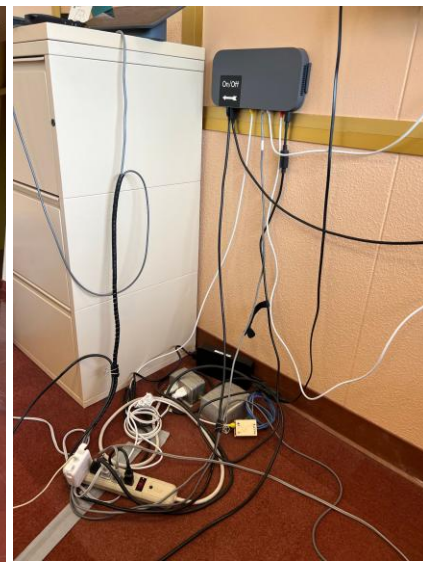
**Figure 03.** Elevator out of service for 3–4 days in February 2026.

Source: Marin County Civil Grand Jury.



**Figure 04.** Bucket to catch leaking water during 2026 winter storm.

Source: Marin County Civil Grand Jury.



**Figure 05.** Tangle of electrical wires in the Grand Jury Room.

Source: Marin County Civil Grand Jury.

During our one year stay in Room 245, the Grand Jury noticed issues with heating and air conditioning, sound intrusion, outdated door locks, leaking skylights, limited availability of electrical outlets, dirty carpeting, unwieldy digital meeting equipment, unappealing landscaping, and non-working elevators. We have spoken with employees who tolerate being too hot or too cold in their offices or in the hallways connecting them due to the building’s design. There are no sinks or water faucets in most of the offices, which is a substantial shortcoming in a modern office space. We have been told that there is inadequate soundproofing in most of the offices in the Administration Building. There is no fiber-optic or ethernet wiring in the building. The

<sup>25</sup> Reesha Ruel and Christina Cramer, *Approval Contract with Barbier Security Group for Security Services at the Civic Center for the Period of June 1, 2025 through May 31, 2026*, agenda item 8A, Board of Supervisors, September 30, 2025, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> See fn. 12.

building has a confusing layout, and there are few clear maps with directions about parking and where particular offices are located. There are no maps of the Civic Center online.

As with most buildings of its era, lead paint and asbestos were used liberally in the Civic Center during construction. The paint has been remediated, but the asbestos remains in the building and must be remediated by outside abatement specialists when it has been or will be disturbed in the course of maintenance or upgrades. This leads to both delays and extra costs when approaching any project that might disturb asbestos.



**Figure 06:** A 2026 leak in an asbestos-containing planter lining on the first floor required enclosing the entire area and managing air flow during remediation.

Source: Marin County Civil Grand Jury.

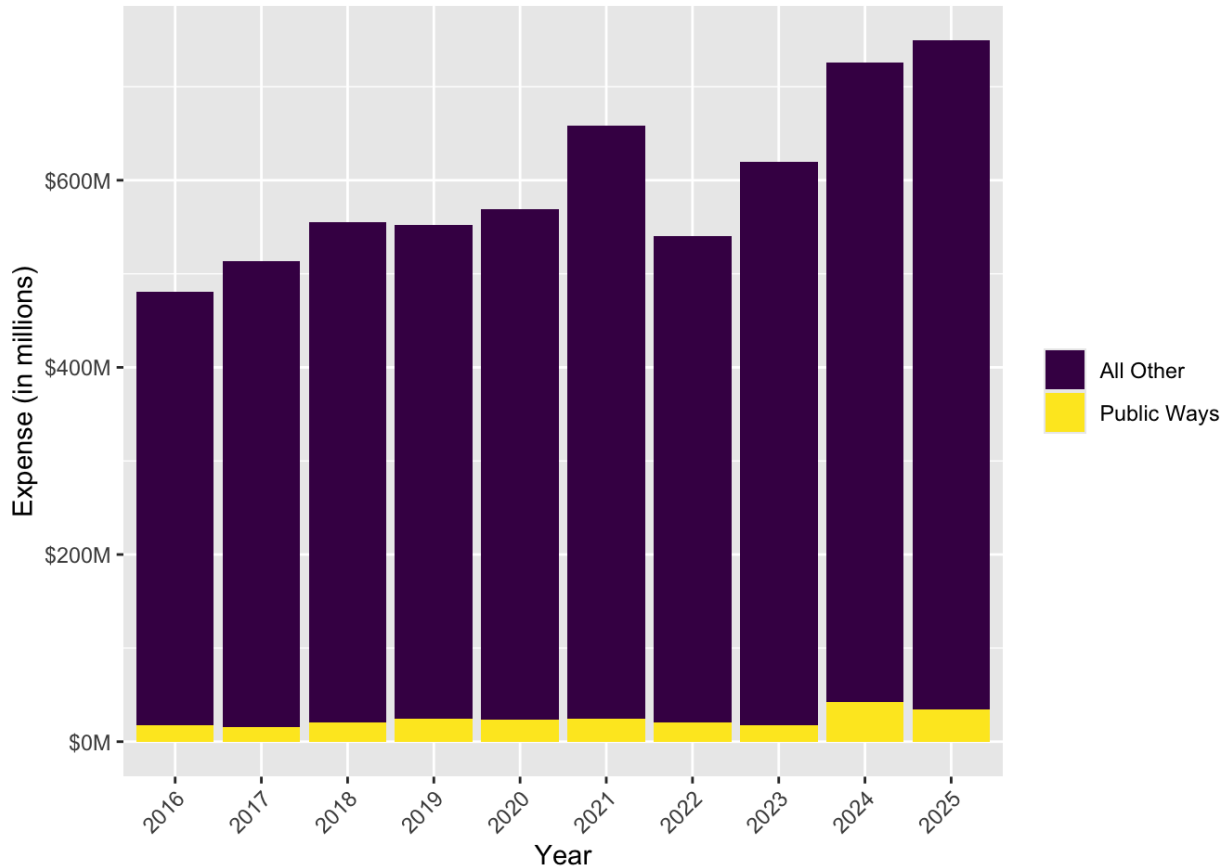
There are other infrastructure issues that are not as visible to the average occupant, but are top of mind for those who work to keep the building running daily. Although the process to replace the HVAC system and cold water chiller has begun, these upgrades are long overdue and tied to the “don’t fix it until it breaks” maintenance approach long used at the Civic Center. The Grand Jury is not able to catalogue the full list of infrastructure systems that need maintenance, upgrading, or replacing in the Civic Center.

Everyone the Grand Jury interviewed thought the Civic Center needed major infrastructure updates and many critiqued its internal appearance. County government is aware of these deficiencies. We note that most of the employees we interviewed expressed enthusiasm for the Civic Center building due to its historic nature and its beautiful setting, and enjoy both the look of the building and being able to say they work in such a landmark.

## Underfunded Building Maintenance

At nearly 70 years old, the Civic Center needs more attention to maintenance and upgrades than it has been given. County staff gave estimates ranging from \$100–\$200 million dollars in deferred maintenance for the Civic Center building alone.<sup>27</sup>

The following graph shows how little of the County budget has been dedicated to *Public Ways and Facilities* in recent years, helping to explain why the current deferred maintenance costs are so large.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 07.** Annual *Public Ways and Facilities* expenditures compared to all other expenditures that comprise the the *Total Governmental Activities* expenditures from 2016 to 2025

Source: Graph compiled from the Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports for each year.

It is difficult to determine exactly how much money has been spent on maintaining the Civic Center building and Campus within the *Public Ways and Facilities* category. Costs related to

<sup>27</sup> The Government Finance Officer’s Association has recommendations concerning Capital Asset Management that may be valuable: Government Finance Officers Association, *Capital Asset Management*, 2017, <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/capital-asset-management> (accessed 3/8/2026).

<sup>28</sup> Adapted using information found in the Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports web site <https://www.marincounty.gov/departments/finance/accounting/annual-comprehensive-financial-reports-acfr>. At the request of the Grand Jury, Marin County’s Finance Director provided data in electronic form. A member of the Grand Jury created the charts from the data using the open source R program.

building maintenance are often embedded within broader categories, such as interdepartmental charges and cost allocation plan pools. Data provided by the Marin County Finance Director shows that, from 2016 to 2025, \$18.9 million was spent maintaining the roof of the Civic Center, \$1.2 million on improving building access, \$1.8 million on office space and bathroom upgrades, and \$1.5 million on interior systems such as electrical and air conditioning equipment.

Even with these modest investments, the budget allocations to *Public Ways and Facilities* have not grown as much as the Grand Jury would have expected, given inflation and the rising costs of salaries, equipment, and materials over the past decade. According to the California Construction Cost Index produced by the Engineering News Record<sup>29</sup>, construction costs increased about 49 percent from 2016 to 2023. If *Public Ways and Facilities* expenditures had kept up with inflation, 2023 expenditures would have been \$2.66 million rather than \$1.79 million. Buildings the size and age of the Civic Center require multiple years of prior planning and budgeting for large expenditures. For example, the Marin Civic Center roof requires \$1.5 million for specialized cleaning every five years to maintain it and maximize its lifespan<sup>30</sup>. This is only one of numerous systems that require the same level of planning for future expenditures.

## **Improvements Underway**

### **County Government Structural Changes**

With the creation of the new Office of the County Executive (OCE), appointed department heads report to the OCE rather than directly to the Board of Supervisors, which allows for clearer lines of authority and performance management. One of the goals of the new structure is to break down “silos” by having a cross-functional executive team to address complex challenges. This “one County” approach is helmed by new County Executive Derek Johnson, and County employees report a more unified approach to the Campus than in the past. Mr. Johnson brings a new and focused vision, reimagining the Civic Center Campus as a gathering place for residents, as well as an enjoyable place to work and transact business.

Perhaps most importantly for the Campus is the County’s new Strategic Plan, the first since 2001. In 2025, the County Budget Director estimated that implementation of the new strategic plan would take six years and several budget cycles, extending until 2032.

The Board of Supervisors’ stated goal is to have quality, reliable infrastructure throughout the County. At the same time, competing interests for budget dollars are more visible and arguably impact more residents on a daily basis. The Board of Supervisors has as its top priorities: Affordable Housing and Homelessness; Climate Change and Sea Level Rise; Race Equity;

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<sup>29</sup> California Department of General Services, Real Estate Services Division, “DGS California Construction Cost Index CCCI”, 2026, <https://www.dgs.ca.gov/RESD/Resources/Page-Content/Real-Estate-Services-Division-Resources-List-Folder/DGS-California-Construction-Cost-Index-CCCI> (accessed 5/8/2026).

<sup>30</sup> County of Marin, *Marin County Civic Center Roof Cleaning*, <https://publicworks.marincounty.gov/civic-center-roof-cleaning/> (accessed 4/27/2026).

Disaster Preparedness; County Infrastructure; and Community and Economic Vitality.<sup>31</sup> Supporting the OCE in increasing the County’s infrastructure investment at this time is vital. Deferred maintenance increases inevitable repair and replacement costs, and unpredicted emergency costs decrease funds available for other County priorities.

## **Building Management Systems**

The current building management systems that control HVAC, lighting, and other electrical and mechanical systems are outdated. The Grand Jury has learned during the course of our interviews that the Department of Public Works, under new and highly professional leadership, is in the process of replacing these systems with one integrated system, a much-needed and encouraging update. This transition will occur over a substantial period of years and represents a long-term investment in infrastructure.

## **Cafeteria Remodeling Project**

The County is currently planning to invest in major upgrades to the existing large and underused cafeteria space. The Grand Jury commends this initiative. The space is intended to become a versatile dining, meeting and entertainment space, capable of serving employees’ daily dining requirements, as well as accommodating special events for the public such as wedding receptions, adoption ceremony celebrations, and other momentous occasions. This proposed renovation aligns with the building’s original design intent while addressing current needs. We recommend that the space continue to serve in part as an educational area, incorporating informational displays about the Civic Center’s history and architecture, and showcasing the building’s design and history to visitors. The Grand Jury believes this project can set a positive precedent for future improvements within the Civic Center.

## **Infrastructure Budgeting Priorities**

Budgetary pressures often impede investment in infrastructure for maintenance and replacement, making it difficult to sustain capital assets at expected service levels. We are encouraged by the OCE’s new approach in developing a full five-year Capital Improvement Program (CIP). This CIP has been presented in draft form to the Board of Supervisors, and we expect that it will be approved, with modifications, in June 2026.

Adoption of a comprehensive CIP brings a level of professionalism to the County’s infrastructure investment that we believe has been lacking. The draft FY 2027–2031 CIP presents projects and funding sources in a single document. Projects have been prioritized based on:

- Safety
- Regulatory compliance
- Asset preservation

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<sup>31</sup> County of Marin, *February Budget Workshop Materials FY 2026–28*, p .7, [https://marin.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view\\_id=33&clip\\_id=12928&meta\\_id=1422893](https://marin.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=33&clip_id=12928&meta_id=1422893) (accessed 4/27/2026).

- Operational continuity
- Community benefit and equity
- Alignment with Board priorities
- Sustainability
- Funding readiness

A cross-departmental CIP Review Committee has been proposed to evaluate submissions, validate scoring, assess funding strategies, and recommend a prioritized capital program. We applaud this approach, as it is more objective than responding individually to any one Supervisor advocating for improvements in his or her own district. Going forward, County departments will submit proposed projects through a standard process, and projects will be scored and prioritized based on three new Infrastructure Goals:

- Protect and preserve existing assets
- Invest in safety and resilience
- Enhance community-facing assets for equity and access

The comprehensive five-year CIP is proposed to be updated annually as part of the County’s budget process.

### **KPMG Recommendations Regarding Department of Public Works**

The Department of Public Works (DPW) is responsible for the maintenance and new construction of Marin County buildings. The professional services firm KPMG was retained to assess the operation of the DPW, and in November 2025, the Board of Supervisors approved the KPMG report, entitled “Organizational Excellence Report of the Department of Public Works.”<sup>32</sup> The report recommended numerous high-level and specific actions with the aim to clarify leadership roles, align staffing with workload and strategic priorities, and promote data-driven decision-making and interdepartmental collaboration within the DPW. In parallel, DPW staff are in the process of implementing a long-awaited project management system that is expected to streamline workflows.

### **A Vision for the Future**

As a Grand Jury, we recognize that although a great deal of thought has been given to the use and functionality of the Civic Center and the Campus in the past, we have not seen strategic planning for this asset in recent years. The OCE has plans to create a Civic Center master plan to address this need. We think the County should encourage a data-driven analysis of the Civic Center and the Campus, exploring potential uses for those spaces to

*“To move forward, people need to be inspired: they need buildings that enhance their creativity and push them to take their future into their own hands.”*

— Francis Kéré  
Architect and Founder,  
Kéré Foundation e.V.

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<sup>32</sup> See fn. 4.

enhance the experiences of County employees and residents as they interact with their government.

Despite recommendations detailing how new construction on the Campus should be approached, only the Farmers' Market project has been approved, and funding shortfalls have delayed it for a decade. Securing funding is a recognized challenge in implementing any changes that need to be made to the Civic Center and Campus. If the County is willing to think strategically about possible enhanced or new uses of these facilities into the future, it needs to begin that process now.

### **Buildings Are Not Static**

Significant changes have been made over the last 50 years to the functions and layout of the Civic Center. The exterior of the building has been largely preserved, although not entirely to Mr. Wright's design. The Campus has never been a pure replica of Mr. Wright's designs; his vision for the Campus included a heliport, an amphitheater, a yacht basin and other spaces that were never constructed. Historical preservation should not be used as a shield to prevent adaptation and renewal of this critical public building.

### **Changes Can Be Made to Function as well as Infrastructure**

As discussed earlier, the Marin Civic Center is already too small and antiquated to house all of the services and departments it was originally intended to accommodate. The County Jail was moved to an adjacent underground space designed by Frank Lloyd Wright protégé Aaron Green in 1994,<sup>33</sup> and our County Emergency Services departments moved to Los Gamos Drive starting in 2014. As observed earlier, our interviewees who worked in the newer building at Los Gamos expressed a strong preference for that building over the Civic Center, largely due to the modern office conveniences that building provides, even though the Civic Center allows for proximity to the OCE and the Board of Supervisors. Changes in function have already occurred at the Civic Center, out of necessity. In the future, changes should be planned well in advance.

Additionally, the County now leases numerous other buildings to house staff due to space concerns at the Civic Center, with some departments split between buildings. This may not be optimal, and it seems prudent to analyze space allocation in the Civic Center to ensure that the building will continue to work for, rather than hamper, the staff it currently serves.

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<sup>33</sup> Green, Aaron G., and Don DeNevi, *An Architecture for Democracy: Frank Lloyd Wright, the Marin County Civic Center: A Narrative by the Associated Architect*, Grendon Pub., 1990.

## Whole Building Design Approach Applied Through the Building Lifespan

Buildings, at their best, connect us with the past and represent a legacy for the future. The Whole Building Design Approach is a collaboration among users, designers, contractors and maintainers, ensuring that building systems are integrated with each other in a way that meets the needs of the current building occupants. Considerations include:



Figure 02A. See fn. 9.

- **Accessibility and Functionality:** Any upgrades must address the specific needs of all users, including those with disabilities. Improvements should enhance the functional programming of the building, addressing spatial needs, system performance, and efficient maintenance of building elements.
- **Aesthetics and Historic Preservation:** As an emblematic Frank Lloyd Wright design, the Civic Center’s historic significance and physical appearance are of paramount importance in considering any modifications.
- **Cost-Effectiveness and Sustainability:** Proposed upgrades should consider life-cycle costs and ensure long-term value for the County. Additionally, all improvements should prioritize environmental benefits and minimize negative impacts, aligning with Marin County’s commitment to sustainability.
- **Productivity:** Enhancements to the Civic Center should prioritize occupants’ well-being, including both physical comfort and workplace efficiency. The building should meet modern needs while preserving its architectural significance.
- **Safety:** Some design elements of the Civic Center are incompatible with modern security standards. By taking advantage of current technologies, we believe that safety and security can be enhanced without detracting from key design elements of the building.

### Historic Preservation vs. Adaptive Reuse

Historic preservation sustains a building’s existing form, integrity and materials, and is generally reluctant to allow exterior additions and alterations. Adaptive reuse revitalizes historic buildings by repurposing them for new functions while meeting modern needs, thereby preserving their heritage and extending their lifespans. Adaptive reuse also allows for the use of new architectural materials that improve efficiency and sustainability, thereby revitalizing a community asset while preserving cultural heritage.

There is currently no intent to use the Civic Center for any purpose other than housing some of Marin County government and the Superior Court’s functions. Nonetheless, we hope that when considering the best uses of the Civic Center in the next 30 years, County leaders will talk to historical architects and consider alternative uses for parts of this celebrated building.

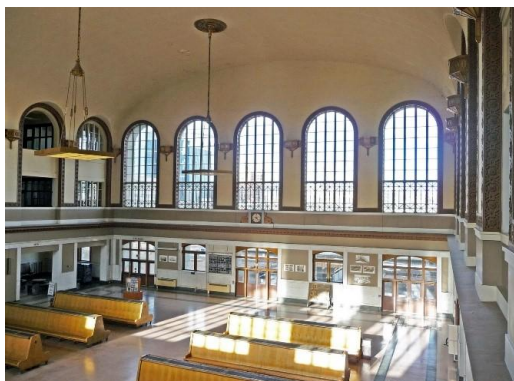
The concept of adaptive reuse has been used to transform, for example: the Ferry Building in San Francisco from an aging transit hub into a marketplace and destination; the Old Patent Office in Washington DC, into the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the historic Mayer Building in Los Angeles into 79 low-income senior apartments; and Denver’s outdated Union Station into a food hub and community gathering place.



**Figure 08.** Ferry Building before removal of highway.  
Source: [Ferry Building Marketplace Official Site.](#)



**Figure 09** Ferry Building after removal of highway.  
Source: [Ferry Building Marketplace Official Site.](#)



**Figure 10.** Union Station Before Transformation.  
Source: [Denver Union Station Official Site.](#)



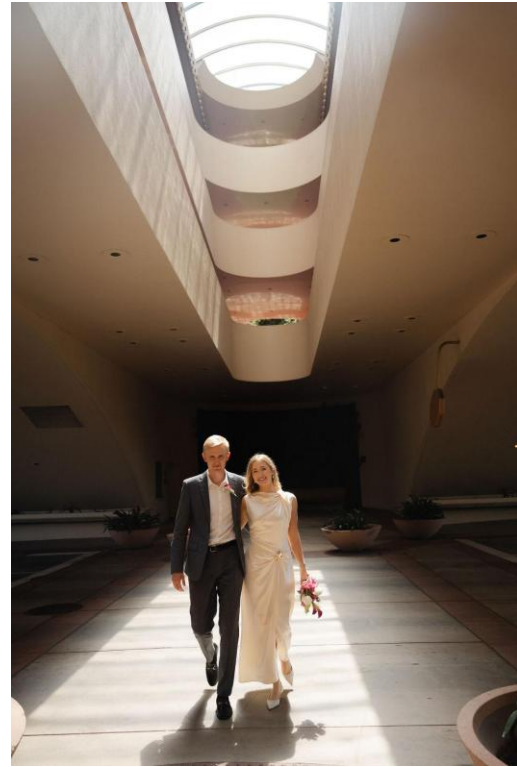
**Figure 11.** Union Station After Transformation.  
Source: [Denver Union Station Official Site.](#)

## **A More Expansive Future For the Civic Center**

The Civic Center is an architectural and historical landmark, and the County of Marin is its steward. The Grand Jury believes that as custodian of this famous and irreplaceable asset, the County has the responsibility to do its best to preserve and protect it for future generations.

The Civic Center has many remarkable and appealing spaces, such as the patio with its blue pond and fountain that serves as a setting for many weddings throughout the year. As a wedding venue, the Civic Center is often booked to capacity, and the Grand Jury feels that the County can immediately create community goodwill and enthusiasm if it can increase the number of weddings that can be scheduled in any given week at this affordable and beautiful setting. According to local photographer Elizabeth Pishal, “This venue is a dream to photograph. The lines, light, and architecture lend themselves to artistic imagery that feels both timeless and modern.”<sup>34</sup>

We anticipate that the renovated cafeteria space, which is planned to become an upscale cafe, will attract even more residents and visitors looking for a special venue for a special event. Many of our forward-looking interviewees suggested that the Civic Center Campus could and should be envisioned as a true “third place”<sup>35</sup> in the County — a venue for meetings, dining, celebrations, entertainment, physical activities and special events.



**Figure 12.** Wedding Photos at the Marin County Civic Center.  
Source: Courtesy of [Elizabeth Pishal Photography](#)

The Holiday Light Spectacular made its inaugural appearance at the Campus in the 2025 holiday season, and was enthusiastically received by approximately 35,000 visitors. The Marin County Fair attracts 80,000–90,000 visitors a year, and plans are being made to keep the large tent on the lagoon island available for longer than the duration of the Fair itself, offering another group gathering spot during the summer.

The Grand Jury believes that the beautiful circular Library space could hold more family-friendly events to draw in new patrons. The Library is regularly open from 9 AM–6 PM Monday-Friday, and we would like to see it expand its hours into the evenings on occasion for more community gatherings or exhibits, thereby welcoming working residents into the space as well.

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Pishal, “How to Get Married at the Marin County Civic Center: A Complete Guide,” *Elizabeth Pishal Photography Blog*, Aug 7, 2025, <https://www.elizabethpishal.com/journal/how-to-get-married-at-the-marin-county-civic-center-a-complete-guide> (accessed 4/13/2026).

<sup>35</sup> The first place is home; the second place is work; Ray Oldenburg, who coined the term third place, defines it as “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.” [Project for Public Spaces Ray Oldenburg Biography](#) (accessed 5/12/2026).

The art exhibits at the Civic Center and the other buildings on Campus do not garner the wider audience that they deserve, and we believe that with more publicity and programming, they, too, could bring more patrons to the Campus. Free concerts and child-oriented activity days at the lagoon area could also draw crowds if the resources were committed.

Judging from the success of the free Holiday Light Spectacular, we urge the County to allocate its own funds, or approach private entities for sponsorships, to keep events at the Campus entirely free or with only a minimal charge for adults. The hope is that the Campus itself becomes revitalized and available to all of the citizens of Marin County as a marvelous space to gather and enjoy.

### **Options and Funding Opportunities**

The Grand Jury recognizes that undertaking the maintenance and restoration of the Civic Center Campus is a huge monetary expense, and that there are no easy paths to financing such a large endeavor. Our interviewees had various ideas regarding the possibilities for financing the revitalization of the Civic Center, falling roughly into the following camps:

- The vast majority of interviewees prefer to set aside money piecemeal as each budget is approved, playing catch-up with the deferred maintenance as quickly and efficiently as possible, and leaving future renovation issues to future governmental leaders and employees;
- Others believe that the deferred maintenance of all buildings owned by or occupied by the County should be addressed relatively soon, and reluctantly conclude that the only practical way to finance such a large project is via a parcel tax or a general obligation bond, in each case covering all County infrastructure needs, not just the Campus; and
- Yet others are willing to consider entirely new uses and different ownership for the Campus, with the County entering into public-private partnerships that might involve selling or leasing some part of the Civic Center Campus to outside interests who would put up funds to adapt it for other uses, perhaps as a dining and entertainment complex, a school, a private office building, a museum and arts space, or housing.

The Grand Jury lacks the expertise or the information to opine on the merits of each of these approaches. Instead, we recommend a full Conditions and Uses Assessment of the building and the Campus, to include or be followed by a report regarding the most feasible financing approaches.

### **Financing**

The Grand Jury believes that it would be advantageous to establish baseline capital improvement spending levels in coordination with the County's current five-year Capital Improvement Plan and two-year budget. These should address the continuing investment necessary to properly maintain the Civic Center and Campus and the County's other capital assets, and include steps to

promote adequate investment in capital renewal and replacement and necessary expenditure levels for maintenance.

### **Public-private Partnerships and Historic Tax Credits**

Public-private partnerships have been used to revitalize historic government buildings that were otherwise facing high maintenance costs. In these arrangements, private entities provide upfront capital for renovations in exchange for long-term leases and the right to adaptively reuse the space. Both the Federal government and the State of California offer historic tax credits (currently equal to 20 percent of qualified rehabilitation expenditures), which are often used in conjunction with public-private partnerships as a tool for bridging the financing gap between high restoration costs and the eventual hoped-for return on investment. To date, the government-owned buildings that have been renovated or adapted for reuse in this way have also been underutilized prior to renovation, which is not the case with the Civic Center. But the Grand Jury believes it is nevertheless useful for future studies to consider alternatives to tax revenues to raise funds for the building.

### **Conclusion**

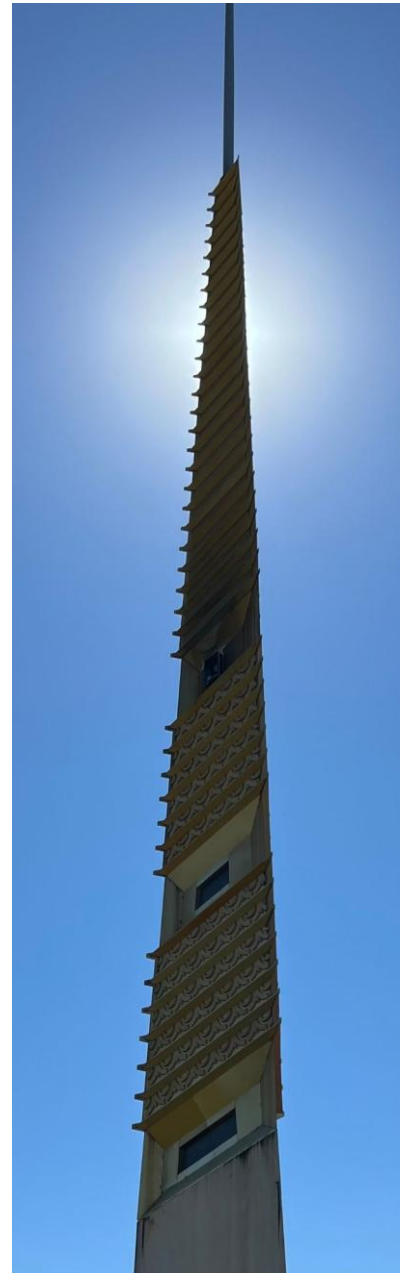
The Grand Jury believes that the Civic Center Campus, and particularly the Civic Center building, needs a long-term plan of rehabilitation and possibly re-envisioning, led by a champion and observed by a group that can act as an advocate for this area. Given the turnover in personnel at the Board of Supervisors and staff, the predictable shifting of priorities for limited resources, and the lack of politically visible advocacy by the Conservancy, we conclude that for significant periods in the past 60 years, no one has loudly and persistently “spoken” for the building.

We recommend below a comprehensive study (or set of studies) of the Civic Center. We suggest, but do not formally recommend (so as not to restrict expert planning), that such report(s) include sections addressing the following issues:

- Sustainability: Embracing modern technologies to enhance energy efficiency and reduce environmental impact.
- Flexibility: Adapting interior spaces to meet changing needs while preserving the overall design integrity.
- Accessibility: Ensuring all public areas of the building are accessible to all members of the public.
- Materials: Choosing replacements that honor the original aesthetic while offering improved durability.
- Technology integration: Incorporating new technologies to enhance functionality.
- Safety and security: Evaluating security in the building, including using current technology to assess and prevent risks.
- Financing: Utilizing all options to increase available funds for Civic Center renewal.

We also recommend that County staff, including the Board of Supervisors, make a concerted effort to transform the remarkable Campus into a true meeting place and draw for the community and beyond. To encourage public engagement with the Civic Center and drive additional revenue prospects, the Grand Jury recommends the Board of Supervisors and County staff explore expanding opportunities for public usage, particularly “deeply emotional” events such as weddings, adoptions, and concerts. Other examples might include:

- Engaging non-profits and community organizations for ideas.
- Holding a community clean up and improvement day for the Campus.
- Including the Campus more widely in the County Fair.
- Encouraging free concerts and other cultural activities on the Campus throughout the year.
- Having Cultural Services encourage or produce Frank Lloyd Wright or Civic Center presentations for civic organizations and the community.
- Expanding the holiday lighting and availability of food trucks.
- Expanding the availability of the Civic Center as a celebratory venue for weddings and other special occasions.
- Making presentations to the community on possible reuse of some space(s).



**Figure 13.** Civic Center Spire.  
Source: Marin County Civil Grand Jury

- Creating maps, both online and physical, that show optimal routes from major city/town centers by automobile, public transit and bicycle.
- Updating the building maps at each entrance and at the other buildings on the Campus to allow for better wayfinding through the Civic Center and Campus.

We have been enormously impressed with the quality and professionalism of the Marin County employees we interviewed. The Grand Jury believes that with strong leadership and increased monetary and outside resources, the staff has the experience and expertise to implement meaningful positive change in the experience of visitors to the Marin Civic Center.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1.** The Civic Center interior spaces have deteriorated due to a lack of long-term strategic facilities management planning.
- F2.** The Civic Center interior spaces have deteriorated due to insufficient resources and staffing in the Department of Public Works and its Facilities Maintenance Division.
- F3.** Previously approved County budgets have not provided for major replacements and maintenance for the Civic Center. Additional funding will need to be allocated to address these shortcomings.
- F4.** The Civic Center does not meet modern security standards.
- F5.** The Civic Center is large enough and important enough to require additional advocates other than the Department of Public Works. No County body is empowered to make the Civic Center a great place to work and visit, inside and out. Although entities are tasked with historical preservation and maintenance, no entity takes a holistic view of the building in regard to long-term functionality, financing, and sustainability.
- F6.** The Design Guidelines used by DPW, Facilities Maintenance, and Parks staff are over 20 years old and should be updated.
- F7.** The Civic Center Campus is underutilized as a gathering place for members of the Marin community. Despite enthusiasm for it to become a community gathering spot — a true “third place” — it has not had sufficient planning or monies allocated to achieve such a goal.
- F8.** Public-private partnerships have been a useful tool to renovate other public buildings.
- F9.** The Civic Center building is confusing and hard to navigate. Modern, clear maps and signage, at the Civic Center, on the Campus grounds and online, would help residents and visitors alike.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to accommodate the County budget cycles, the Grand Jury has recommended dates that we believe align with budget planning schedules.

- R1.** By January 1, 2028, the Board of Supervisors should approve and fund a comprehensive Conditions and Uses Assessment Report / Facilities Asset Management Plan for the Civic Center. The Report / Plan should analyze current uses of the Civic Center and the entire Campus, and plan for its future.
- R2.** By January 1, 2027, the Board of Supervisors should appoint a commission consisting of County staff and members of the public that focuses on long-term revitalization of the Civic Center, including improvements to the uses and functionality of the work and community spaces. This commission should make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding future planning and uses, facilitate community engagement, encourage public-private partnerships, support philanthropic funding, and monitor the progress of planned maintenance and improvements.
- R3.** By January 1, 2028, the Board of Supervisors should approve and fund a full security and safety study for the Marin County-managed portions of the Civic Center building.
- R4.** By January 1, 2028, the Board of Supervisors should direct the Department of Public Works to update the Civic Center Building and Campus maps across all formats (online, physical, etc.) in order to improve routes to and navigation within the building and campus.
- R5.** By June 30, 2027, the Board of Supervisors should direct County staff to explore and report back on expanding the availability of the Civic Center as a venue for celebratory events such as wedding ceremonies, adoption finalizations, and a place to observe other moments that are especially memorable in the lives of Marin residents.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses from the following governing bodies:

From the following governing bodies within 90 days:

- Marin County Board of Supervisors (F1–F9, R1–R5)

The governing body indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted in accordance with Penal Code section 933, subdivision (c), and subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

## INVITED RESPONSES

The Grand Jury invites, but does not require, responses from the following:

- Marin County Executive (F1–F9, R1–R5)
- Marin County Director of Public Works (F1–4, F6, F9; R1–4)
- Marin County Director of Parks and Open Space (F6, F9)

Note: At the time this report was prepared information was available at the websites cited.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury *not* contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends Penal Code section 929 to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.