

A Better Site for the New Jail Is Available On Opportunity Corridor

(Crain's Cleveland Business, May 8, 2022)

By James M. Trutko

The Justice Center Steering Committee recently announced its initial site selection for the new jail in an effort to re-assert their control and demonstrate their competence in the face of public criticism. As usual, the Committee was not completely open about the specific reasons for its selection of three parcels at 2700 Transport Road and why additional sites weren't worthy of further consideration. They picked a poor site with several obvious problems, but a better site is available on Opportunity Corridor.

In November 2020, the Committee identified several criteria for the site location - proximity to the courts and emergency services, easy highway access to law enforcement, access to public transit and parking for attorneys and visitors. The site should be of adequate size and configuration with some potential for expansion, be able to be acquired quickly at reasonable cost, and compatible with the surrounding community. From the standpoint of site development, it should have access to all utilities, proper soil conditions and be free of environmental or hazardous conditions. Finally, the Committee had wanted a site that "provides more safe and humane living conditions for inmates and working conditions for staff."

The Committee faces several additional constraints- some self-imposed and some political. The Committee wants a low-rise facility which requires a fairly large tract of land. Accessibility by highway and public transit is important. The City of Cleveland wants the jail in the City of Cleveland to generate tax revenue. No residential neighborhood wants a jail so many are not considered even if they meet other criteria. Many older industrial tracts have environmental problems or other incompatible uses.

Many court and judicial employees like working downtown so some are lobbying for rehabilitating the existing Justice Center. On the other hand, people concerned about downtown development and the Convention Center would prefer to see the jail moved from the Ontario location and out of downtown altogether. If the Justice Center were modernized, the disruption from reconstruction of the complex would make marketing the Convention Center and downtown as a tourist destination much more difficult for several years.

The site now being actively evaluated is 2700 Transport Road, but a better site would be the south side of Opportunity Corridor Road between East 73rd and East 79th Streets. It's not only in the City of Cleveland – it's right across from the new Cleveland Police Headquarters now being constructed. Having the new Police Headquarters across the street is a major site advantage because the location would minimize cost and downtime for the Cleveland police force which handles nearly two-thirds of the violent crime in Cuyahoga County. In addition, having 1,000 deputies converge on the area from all directions should improve public safety and encourage residential and commercial development in the area.

The combined site has over 1 million square feet with about 700,000 square feet on the primary site from East 75th to E79th. It appears to be about 800 feet deep and 1200 feet long and is a flat site with expansion possible to the east and west to handle parking or other related facilities. Environmental concerns are likely to be fewer because it was formerly a residential area.

The acquisition cost and time would be minimal since there are currently very few homes or buildings on the site, and the city or county land bank owns much of the land. Opportunity Corridor Road and industrial development to the north and the rail line to the south provide natural buffers which diminish the immediate impact on the community and reduce the likelihood of political opposition.

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From a location standpoint, the Opportunity Corridor Road site has great highway access from all of Cuyahoga County. Like Transport Road, it is also only 14 minutes from the Justice Center. Moreover, it is very accessible by public transit for all of Cuyahoga County; it's only one-tenth of a mile to the 79th Street RTA station, so it's effectively connected to almost all RTA bus lines. It's only two miles (seven minutes) to Cleveland Clinic's emergency room and it's close to University Hospital as well. A variety of relevant supportive social services for the criminal justice system are in the area.

While there are not numerous restaurants and stores nearby, there is potential for new business development as restaurants, retailers and justice suppliers move in to be close to the facility and the police station. The development impact would increase if social service agencies and the hospitals decided to set up specialized rehabilitation and drug-treatment facilities to handle justice contract work. Obviously, the area's development potential as a "Safety Corridor" would be significantly improved if the courts were also relocated to the area.

In contrast, the main benefits of the 2700 Transport Road site seem to be that it's in the City of Cleveland, close to downtown and big enough for the facility. The site consists of three irregular-shaped parcels on a hillside below a railroad track and Broadway Avenue. While located near downtown, only 14 minutes from the Justice Center, it's on a pot-holed dead-end street, off another dead-end street, which is off a minor street. The site is surrounded by companies that supply stone, concrete and other building materials. As a longtime industrial site, it has a past heritage of environmental hazards which creates uncertainty about full remediation. Because it is owned by an operating company and needs an environmental clearance, the acquisition time and cost are also uncertain.

The Committee probably valued the likely absence of political opposition; most potential critics could not find the site without a GPS and there are no neighbors with political influence. There are also no nearby restaurants, gas stations or retail stores. There are no nearby supporting social services, and emergency services are at some distance. The link to public transit is poor: there is a 20-minute walk up a steep hill to bus services and a half-hour walk to the nearest RTA station. The site's location and poor access make it unlikely to generate any additional development.

Based on the criteria the Justice Center Steering Committee identified and the many constraints it faces in locating a new jail, the Opportunity Corridor-E73rd- E79th site seems like a good location to seriously evaluate. With the new Cleveland police station across the street and the county's Juvenile Justice Center only 1.5 miles away, county residents might start talking about the "Safety Corridor" if the Opportunity Corridor-East 73rd-East 79th location for the new jail works out and some specialized justice-related services move into Opportunity Corridor.

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These Illustrations are from Google Maps.

2700 Transport Road



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Transport Road Vs. Opportunity Corridor-E73rd-E79th



Opportunity Corridor-E73rd-E79th

