

lifespan perspective

A different way of looking at design

Planning a Successful Senior Center Construction Project: Things We've Learned

Doug and Ellen Gallow will present a workshop on this topic at ASA's Aging in America conference in Washington DC, at 1:30 PM on March 21. Here's a sneak peak at some key points. Learn more about the conference at asaging.org/aia.

As we celebrate the 10th Anniversary of Lifespan Design Studio we look back with profound satisfaction on dozens of new and improved senior centers. But all too often we've shared in our clients' frustration over mismatches between what it will actually cost to construct their project and expectations that were formed before design began. There are many reasons why this painful miscalculation may occur, with one of the most common being

preliminary estimates (or more often "guesstimates") of project costs that are based upon incomplete and/or inaccurate information.

Cost Estimating Pitfalls

One of the most common pitfalls in early projections of construction costs is the temptation to rely upon free information from well-intended individuals:

- If someone tries to tell you they have a friend who built an office building up the street last year for \$145 per square foot (and therefore you should be able to build your new senior center for that), thank them and back away.
- If your building committee has developed a list of rooms and square footages, and declared that your new facility should be 12,487 square feet, hold on to the list and pick up the phone.

In either case, it's time to call a professional.

Begin at the Beginning

Although it may seem premature (because you're not yet ready to begin design), your facility *planning* team should include a qualified architect. Before you can make reliable projections about the cost to renovate your existing facility or build a new one, you'll need to develop a detailed understanding

Inspiration Cam!

Lifespan Design Studio was honored to participate in the design of five new or improved senior centers currently under construction!

Congratulations on making it happen...



Lawrenceville Senior Center Gwinnett County, GA

PPI, architect of record

Beautiful but outdated senior center building updated for future success (shown above)

Oklahoma City Senior Health & Wellness Center

Oklahoma City, OK
GSB, architect of record

New wellness-focused senior center with gym, pool, fitness center and much more

125 Live (formerly Rochester Senior Center) Rochester, MN

TSP, architect of record
New state-of-the-art Center for Active Adults attached to the expanded and improved Rochester Recreation Center

United Senior Services Springfield, OH

MCF, architect of record
Former Eagles building gets a comprehensive makeover to become the new home of United Senior Services

Bayview Senior Services San Francisco, CA

MBS, developer
New senior center on the ground floor of the new Dr. George W. Davis Senior Residence



Lifespan Design Studio offers architectural studies, planning, and design services for senior centers nationwide.

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of what will go into it in terms of rooms and spaces, equipment, furniture, and other cost-impacting details. For best results, the discussion of rooms and spaces must begin at a more elemental level, looking at:

- the kinds of **activities** to be accommodated (programs, services, drop-in uses, administrative functions, use by others)
- the needs and preferences of the **people** to be accommodated (participants, staff)
- **other things** that take up space in the building, including corridor widths, storage requirements, maintenance needs, and mechanical systems

This is where the benefits of working with an architect with demonstrated knowledge of the senior center industry and design for aging become apparent. Equipped with this knowledge and insight, they will ask the right questions, understand your answers, and be able to advise you appropriately. A podiatrist is an MD, but you wouldn't choose them to treat your sore throat—it's similarly risky to trust the planning or design of your new facility to a general practitioner.

Discussions of the above listed issues give the architect the information they need to help you develop a "program of requirements" for your new or renovated facility. Architectural programs range from very basic lists of rooms and associated square footages to detailed documents describing the intended uses of the space, the preferred configuration, its ideal placement within the facility, equipment and furniture requirements, the anticipated types of finishes, and miscellaneous special considerations impacting price. Lacking this level of detail, early estimates are often based on the average cost to construct a "typical" room or space of the specified type. It's easy to see why a cost estimate based upon a more

detailed program describing your vision and needs may more accurately forecast the actual cost to construct your new or improved center.

Construction Costs vs. Total Project Costs

Another common pitfall in early cost projections is the tendency to focus on the cost of construction without due consideration of total project costs. Although miscellaneous costs vary depending upon the unique circumstances of each project, they may include:

- design services
- permit fees
- legal fees
- site testing fees
- site acquisition and preparation costs
- owner's representative or construction management fees
- furniture and decorations
- specialty equipment for kitchens, offices, exercise rooms, etc.
- moving expenses
- costs to relocate during construction of renovations
- fundraising expenses

The size and scope of what can actually be constructed often have to be reduced when these costs are left out of the discussion during early planning efforts. Whether the architect that you are working with provides cost estimating services themselves, or coordinates the effort on your behalf with a professional cost estimator, it's important to express your interest in projecting *total* project costs. The time that you put in on these issues now will result in a much more reliable and realistic set of expectations as you put the project in motion.

The evaluation of sites and/or buildings under consideration for your new facility is a critical piece of

*the planning puzzle. We'll look at **site issues** in our next edition, and at the ASA conference on March 21.*

What is an Opinion of Probable Cost?

It's no accident that architects and cost estimators use the term "opinion of probable cost" rather than "cost estimate" – our lawyers and insurance carriers insist that we use an expression that more clearly communicates the *provisional* nature of this effort.

Although preliminary "cost estimating" is a useful and necessary exercise, the numbers that it produces can and most likely will be impacted by issues both within and beyond your control as you get deeper into the project. To compensate for this, these opinions of *probable* cost typically include contingency funds to cover price creep that may arise from changes that occur during design, and unforeseen costs that may crop up during construction. Additionally, estimates of projected escalation in construction costs (from the time of the estimate to the time of construction) are often incorporated.

Cost estimates should be revisited at scheduled intervals as your project progresses through planning and various phases of design completion. Numbers may be revised upward or downward to reflect **actual** versus **projected** project details.