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## PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, June 17, 2014

### NEW COURTHOUSE SCHEMATIC DESIGN APPROVED

**EDINBURG** – Hidalgo County Commissioners voted to approve the schematic design for the new county courthouse.

The schematic design includes the first set of drawings and elevations and the probable cost estimate of the building. The Commissioners took no action regarding the next steps, instead asking that an item be placed on the agenda for the next meeting, which will be held on Monday, June 30.

According to ERO Architects, the firm contracted to prepare the schematic design, the estimated cost for the 463,804-square-foot, 10-story building is \$157 million – \$127.7 million for the building, site and contingencies and \$29.3 million to cover other expenses, such as furniture, technology and security equipment.

"This is not a typical office building," said ERO Architects partner Eli Ochoa. "This is a highly sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century judicial complex with state of the art public, security and court systems, all designed within American Judicial Standards."

While funding of the project was not on the agenda, Ochoa said there is a need for "speed to market" because of escalating construction costs.

"Every day that the project is delayed costs the county \$25,000 – which adds up to about \$9 million a year in higher construction costs," Ochoa said.

Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia said the county has outgrown the 60-plus-year-old courthouse that was completed in 1954.

"We could spend upwards of \$30 million to bring the courthouse up to code and at the end we will still have a 60-plus-year-old building with the maintenance problems of a 60-plus-year-old building that does not meet our needs," Garcia said. "This alone is compelling us to do something now. Meantime, we know that construction costs will continue to escalate and we know that there is a very serious liability."

Precinct 2 Commissioner Hector "Tito" Palacios likened the expense of maintaining the current courthouse, as well as the satellite courts and offices that are needed because of lack of space to throwing good money after bad.

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### Hidalgo County Commissioners' Court

**Ramon Garcia**  
*County Judge*

**A. C. Cuellar, Jr.**  
*Commissioner, Precinct 1*

**Hector "Tito" Palacios**  
*Commissioner, Precinct 2*

**Joe M. Flores**  
*Commissioner, Precinct 3*

**Joseph Palacios**  
*Commissioner, Precinct 4*

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"We have spent years trying to make this old courthouse work for the people of Hidalgo County and have ended up spending extra on maintenance and upkeep, replacing equipment, and on rental space and modular buildings," said Palacios. "It's not cost effective to continue to pump money into repairs – and we have just outgrown it."

In addition to the state of disrepair that are cause for health and safety concerns, there are also security issues because there isn't enough space or access to allow for the separation of inmates from the general public. People appearing for jury duty, staff members, members of the legal profession and the general public congregate in the same areas as inmates in custody.

A major component of the design is that it provides for Texas Jail Commission-licensed detention facilities on the ground floor and for each court. This will keep inmates awaiting trial separated from courthouse staff, jurors, and the general public.

The design also includes energy management systems, escalators and elevators to quickly, and separately, move inmates awaiting trial and the general public and staff from floor to floor, and space on the top two floors for six additional courts to accommodate the county's needs for the next 75 years.

The next step for Commissioners, said Marty Salazar, the county's purchasing agent, is to decide on selecting an architectural firm for the next phase of the project by either going through the county's pool or securing a Request for Qualifications that are "project specific" to select a firm. ERO's contract with the county, concluded upon the submission of the schematic design – although they could be among the firms considered for the next phase.

"We take our responsibility to be good stewards very seriously," said Precinct 1 Commissioner A.C. Cuellar. "Yes, we're going to work very hard to find a way to get this done with the least possible impact on our residents. But we also wouldn't be good stewards if we decided to stay with the status quo because there are very real safety and health concerns that are only going to become more critical as time passes."

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