

The Real Costs of Building



By Rodney James

What is it going to cost?

This is one of the hardest, and most necessary, conversations had at the beginning of any project. Unfortunately, it can also be one of the most misleading conversations if you don't have the right partner beside you throughout the process.

There are many important variables to be considered when determining cost, but before you go get bids or estimates, be clear on the function of the space.

What character and feel should it have? Are there any specific design elements that will help you utilize the space better?

While those conversations aren't the topic of this article, we are adamant about those being the starting point of any project and talk about them often.

In this article, let's focus on the real cost of building and the long-term costs associated with a ministry facility.

“Cost Per Square Foot”

Many times, an initial conversation about a construction project includes the “cost per square foot” question. It's how most people are used to talking about construction projects. However, this can be a dangerous trap for many reasons.

Let's look at two of the major reasons that “cost per square foot” should be scrutinized and examined more closely, and why you should have a partner to walk through the process with you.

Details, Details, Details

If you are comparing cost per square foot numbers, you absolutely must understand every single detail of is included in each of those numbers. In short, are you comparing apples to apples?

One company may have inexpensive light fixtures, inexpensive plumbing fixtures, a very small budget for audio, video, and lighting systems, grades of finishes might be drastically different in quality... or, in the worst case scenario, many things might be left out of the cost per square foot estimate, such as seats in the sanctuary, the isolation transformer for the audio and video systems, acoustical treatment,

permit fees, design fees, and the list goes on and on.

If all of those, or even a few of those items are not what your budget expectation may be, the cost per square foot is an ethereal number at best and could be as much as doubled before you are finished with the project.

Imagine taking that news back to the body and asking for more and more giving. This goes beyond budget to trust in leadership and momentum.

Due diligence in the budgeting process will build trust between your leadership and your members. That is why it is so vitally important that you have a very well-defined scope if you are going to



attempt a price per square foot comparison. Jesus said in Luke 14:28, “For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?”

When we think about calculating the cost of doing a church construction project, we have to consider the entire project cost, not just certain components of the building: all material, all labor, all fees, all permits, all infrastructure, all site work, etc.

Knowing this, you have to arm yourselves with the right questions and a partner with proven experience of finishing projects on time and on or under budget. There is way more than a building at stake.

Long-Term Cost of Cutting Corners

The second critical area to figure out before you build, from a budgeting perspective, is what will be the long-term cost of cutting corners during the construction process?

It is too easy of a decision when your budget is tight to save a few dollars during construction to make the budget work in the short term. But, if you do not carefully consider the potential long-term impact to both your facility and ongoing budget, you will most likely end up spending exponentially more over time.

A couple examples to consider would be saving \$.50 per square foot by not adding the right insulation package or cutting the HVAC budget by installing low-cost systems. If that impacts your energy costs by adding 18% a year, you could spend twice that cost savings in less than 7 years. Sometimes what seems like a great saving on the front end turns out to be a huge headache in the long-term.

Other considerations as you're building would be whether to include LED or even low-voltage lighting systems, plumbing fixtures that conserve water, automatic sink valves so they cannot be left running, properly sized versus oversized HVAC systems, high-quality commercial doors and hardware, and so many other building components. Literally, every decision you make in the design process will have an effect on your long-term cost or savings.

There are so many of these traps that if your design and building partner is not helping you consider both construction as well as long-term operational and

maintenance costs, you may end up spending much more over time and putting valuable ministry money into your facility operation budgets.

The right partner to walk with you through the design and construction process should provide options, potential savings, and also the long-term trade off costs to take some construction shortcuts.

It is so important to have a partner who cares as much about your ministry as they do about your project. Longevity and the function of your building are two items you do not want to sacrifice for short-term savings.

Don't be the church that is like the other guy Jesus speaks about who doesn't calculate the cost, who lays a foundation and is not able to finish, or, even worse, builds the building and is not able to

afford the operational and maintenance costs over time.

Find a partner who knows what to ask in the budget and design process, and who will faithfully walk beside you to build a long-term facility that will glorify God and reach people for years to come. **RPN**

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