

Crowded jails get top billing at budget review

Commissioners propose millions for more facilities

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The county may spend at least \$260 million to build jails and juvenile-detention facilities as it tries to address state agencies' criticisms that its jails are overcrowded.

Commissioners Court gave an initial green light Tuesday to building a \$245 million adult-inmate-processing center downtown, a \$22.5 million adult jail for low-level offenders in Atascocita and possibly an adjacent juvenile-detention facility at that location in far northeast Harris County.

The city of Houston would contribute \$32 million toward the inmate-processing center, in exchange for the county's agreement to process most suspects arrested by Houston police.

The detention facilities, which would require a bond issue likely to go before voters next year, were among a wide variety of county financial matters that came up during the annual midyear budget review.

The adult jails have not been in compliance with regulations set by the Texas Commission on Jail Standards since 2004.

And the state Juvenile Probation Commission repeatedly cited the county's old juvenile pre-trial detention facility on West Dallas for crowding. The facility that replaced it, at the recently opened Juvenile Justice Center downtown, already is beyond capacity.

The new detention center, which opened in April, was designed to hold 250 youths. It has exceeded that capacity almost constantly since it opened, said Harvey Hetzel, director of the county's Juvenile Probation Department.

Sheriff's office Chief Deputy Mike Smith said the inmate-processing center and the Atascocita jail, with a total capacity of 4,600, would relieve adult crowding until at least 2015, even with the county's rising population.

The sheriff's office is projecting its jail population will average nearly 9,800 inmates this year, more than 1,330 above jail capacity, says a report by the county's budget office.

The Texas Commission on Jail Standards found the adult jails out of compliance this summer because more than 300 inmates were sleeping on mattresses on low-riders — bed frames 6 inches off the floor — instead of typical bunks.

Crowding was far worse a year earlier, when some dormitory-style cells designed for 24 inmates were housing more than twice as many.

As for the juvenile crowding, commissioners are considering renovating the top five floors of the former adult jail at 1301 Franklin as well as building the new facility in Atascocita.

The county already operates training facilities, detention centers and athletics fields at its Atascocita complex.

Commissioner Jerry Eversole, whose district includes Atascocita, praised the proposed location because it is not near residential areas. "It should not cause a tremendous amount of furor from the community," he said. "It should be a good use of this property."

The jail could be built in modular units, with the first 400-bed facility open by summer of 2008 and the facility completed by 2010, said Dick Raycraft, county budget and management-services director.

The county likely would ask voters to approve bonds for the detention facilities in November 2007, when it also may propose bonds for roads, parks and libraries, and possibly for a Family Law Center downtown.

Raycraft projected that the roads, parks and inmate-processing center would require \$666 million in bonds. He hasn't yet calculated the debt required for the Atascocita jail, juvenile-detention facilities and the Family Law Center.

The 640,000-square-foot inmate-processing center would be built at an undetermined site in the county's downtown jail complex on San Jacinto and Baker. It would open in late 2010 and include a large mental health wing.

Commissioners Court rejected spending \$31 million to renovate and repair the closed juvenile-detention facility at 3540 W. Dallas.

It authorized Raycraft to see how much the county could make by selling that property.

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