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New county jail among options in inmate overcrowding

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With memories of 1981 still fresh in most of their minds, McLennan County commissioners faced the inevitable Tuesday: Their overcrowded county jail is only getting worse.

The solution, they say, may mean a new jail.

When county officials opened their \$7 million downtown jail 27 years ago, it was supposed to serve McLennan County until 2000. However, the day prisoners moved in, it was already one inmate over capacity — plus a prisoner set his bunk on fire.

As commissioners, County Judge Jim Lewis and Sheriff Larry Lynch deal with the latest jail overcrowding crisis, they hope to employ a clearer crystal ball than their predecessors had when planning for the future.

County officials are also mindful of the forced construction of the county jail on State Highway 6 in 1986. It was supposed to be all the county needed until 2010, Lewis said.

The county has since built three additions to that jail.

So how best to prepare for future growth this time, commissioners asked themselves Tuesday morning.

“There is no doubt in my mind,” Precinct 4 Commissioner Ray Meadows said. “We are going to have to have a jail.”

Meadows and other county officials noted Tuesday that no apparent plans exist by the state to build new prison space in the next few years. That could lead to another backlog of county inmates who are ready for transfer to state prisons, also nearing capacity.

There were 96 “prison-ready” inmates in the county jail awaiting transfer on Tuesday, Lynch said. They were among a total of 868 inmates on Highway 6. Seventy more were transferred to the county-owned but privately operated detention center downtown to help relieve overcrowding and help county officials with inmate classification and detention requirements.

The county continues to operate under a remedial order from the Texas Commission on Jail Standards because of overcrowding. However, Lynch said the commission knows the problem isn't unique to McLennan County and is aware the county is moving forward with plans to alleviate overcrowding.

"They are working with us," Lynch said. "They are seeing a commitment made by the court to correct the situation and they are very pleased to see it moving forward. We will meet with them again in August."

Commissioners earlier this month authorized hiring 12 new jailers, at a cost of about \$203,000, to address concerns by the state jail standards commission.

The jail has been teetering on its maximum capacity for several years, operating with variances from the commission.

Total capacity at the Highway 6 jail is 931.

McLennan County has been leasing the 27-year-old downtown jail to Community Education Centers, a New Jersey-based private detention company formerly known as CiviGenics that operates in 22 states.

The county had been making more than \$800,000 a year by leasing the detention center. However, that revenue stream has been cut drastically in the past year because the county has been transferring inmates to the downtown jail to ease overcrowding on Highway 6, Lewis said.

Even with what Lewis calls a "sweetheart deal" with CEC, the county's revenue from the lease is down by about \$600,000 this year because of having to pay to house its own prisoners with CEC.

The county's contract with CEC expires Oct. 1, and one option being considered by the county is taking back the 326-bed facility to hold county prisoners. While that would help, Lynch called it a "Band-Aid" approach to major bleeding.

"It looks like there is a lot of cooperation between the sheriff's office and the commissioners' court, and that is the way it is going to have to be to make this thing work," Lynch said.

In contrast to the \$7 million spent for a jail 27 years ago, Lewis said a 1,000-bed facility likely will cost from \$40 million to \$60 million. He would prefer for a private corporation to design, build, fund and operate a facility on eight acres the county owns just west of the Highway 6 jail.

Another option: The county could build a new jail and have a private company operate it, Lewis said.

Commissioners are studying county population projections to factor into the equation and will consider other options in coming weeks before seeking proposals from companies seeking to do business with the county, Lewis said.

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— COUNTY JAIL OPTIONS —

McLennan County commissioners are considering several scenarios to deal with the overcrowded county jail:

- * Taking over the downtown jail now leased to Community Education Centers, formerly CiviGenics.
- * Having a private vendor fund, build and operate a 1,000-bed jail on land west of the Highway 6 jail.
- * Some combination of the first two.
- * Having the county build a jail with a private vendor or the county operating it.

The county is also open to other scenarios, County Judge Jim Lewis said.
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