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Editorial: Smart approach to inmate overcrowding

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Texas always is playing catch-up on prison overcrowding, with its only response being building more cellblocks.

That needs to change.

- [Comment on this story](#) The McLennan County commissioners say they are being forced to look into building a \$40 million to \$60 million, 1,000-bed facility.

Counties throughout Texas have the same problem.

It's all related to prison sentencing, and Texas can't build its way out of it.

From 1988 to 1995, Texas taxpayers funded more than 90,000 state prison beds with about \$2.3 billion in bonds.

That was followed by a massive prison-building program of the 1990s.

Nonetheless, state prisons shortly were bulging at the seams again and Texas' county jails were overcrowded with state-ready inmates.

The situation also forced the state to initiate a revolving-door parole system of early release.

Now, once more, Texas is confronted with inmate overcrowding.

The McLennan County commissioners must deal with a projected shortfall of between 334 and 449 jail beds in the next two years based on the county's expected population growth.

The commissioners have voiced concerns that the state prison system, projected to have a shortfall of 11,000 beds by 2011, will again force more overcrowding back on county jails.

County Judge Jim Lewissaid he prefers to find a private corporation to design, build, fund and operate a 1,000-bed facility on eight acres the county owns just west of the Highway 6 jail. The facility would provide a revenue stream by taking in inmates from other overcrowded jails.

Texas lawmakers, judges, prosecutors and other elected officials long have felt that voters will reward them for talking up longer prison sentences and coming up with new crimes that call for prison time.

The time has come for Texas to change the business-as-usual, "tough on crime" approach that packs Texas prisons and causes jails to overflowing, with the impetus to build more prisons and jails.

With smarter sentencing, particularly as pertains to drug crimes, lawmakers can reduce the prison population without endangering the public.

This should be done by upgrading Texas' probation system and adopting modern rehabilitation programs for low-level drug offenders.

Texas needs to put a greater emphasis on improved drug treatment programs and also adopt more alternative sentencing options.

It's time to get smart on crime.

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