

New County Jail Won't Meet Population Projections

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County Board Chairman Bob

A consultant told commissioners Tuesday the 664 beds in the plans will fall short of what she expects the county might need by 2020.

Designs are coming together for a new Lancaster County jail, but a consultant told county commissioners Tuesday the 664-bed plan will fall short of what the county may need by 2020.

New projections show the county could need 827 beds by then, said Karen Chinn of South Carolina-based Chinn Planning. By 2025, that need jumps to 945 beds, according to her analysis of data from 1998 through 2007.

That means officials need to look for answers other than incarceration, she said during a jail design workshop for architects, commissioners and others.

In an interview, County Board Chairman Bob Workman agreed, saying the county will need to continue to pursue alternatives to jail.

The jail, planned for Southwest 40th and West O streets, is being designed to allow expansion to 1,000 beds, and the 37-acre site has room for more expansion if needed.

“It doesn’t concern me because the design is such that an expansion can really take place at any time in the future,” Workman said of the new projection. “We do not have to wait out ‘til 2020.”

The county has been ramping up a house arrest program and other alternatives to jail. Community Corrections Director Kim Etherton also is studying the possibility of expanding programs to identify more candidates for electronic monitoring.

The jail population dipped slightly for the first quarter of 2008, compared to 2007, and county leaders have said alternatives may have played a role. The average daily population, including inmates at the downtown jail and in a minimum-security complex in Air Park, hit 471 in 2007. The system has a capacity of 373.

The design team has been working since February and is on track to complete its work late this year. Construction is set to begin early next year.

The County Board has yet to decide how it will pay for the project, estimated at \$61 million to \$65 million.

The design team is looking at efficiencies, including a decision to flip the layout so a loading dock and entrance for law enforcement vehicles would be closer to the access point off West O Street and less reliant on Southwest 40th Street. The new design also would require less paving and grading.

A big concern for commissioners is the rising cost of materials. Steel prices, for example, have risen more than 40 percent since January, said Greg Newport of the Lincoln-based architectural firm The Clark Enersen Partners.

The team is looking for a way to buy some of the building materials and store them in warehouse space planned for the property's south end.

But first, the county needs the money to pay for it, purchasing agent Vince Mejer reminded commissioners.

Commissioners have been waiting to hear if the city will help finance the project. They've pitched a plan involving the Public Building Commission but need the OK from city leaders.

The city has promised an answer by July 7, and the county will decide on a financing plan July 15, commissioners said.

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