

## Faced with referendum, board drops plan for jail expansion

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Space needs for next 20 years to be reviewed

News Staff Reporter

The Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday rescinded a \$29.9 million bond proposal for jail expansion rather than face a countywide referendum orchestrated by a grass-roots petition drive.

Instead, the board will begin a comprehensive review of all county facilities and determine space needs for the next 20 years, said County Administrator Bob Guenzel. The county completed a 20-year space plan in 1985 that was amended several times and needs updating, he said.

"This allows us to step back and evaluate our immediate and future needs," Guenzel said, indicating that the process for commissioners will begin in March and will likely take most of 2006.

Chuck Ream, a Scio Township trustee and spokesman for the group that organized the drive, said he was pleased the petitions derailed the county plan. He also said there remains a need to reshape the county board in upcoming elections to adequately address public safety.

"This is a victory for the citizens but it's only halfway," Ream said. "We have to put people on the commission that will support a competent and unified road patrol that serves the entire county."

After more than a month of consideration, county board members voted 10-1 Wednesday to officially stop their plan to use money currently earmarked for police services in communities that contract with the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department to expand the chronically overcrowded jail and improve court security.

The Save Our Sheriff's Committee, or SOS, composed of township officials, sheriff's deputies and community activists, collected more than 21,000 signatures in less than a month once commissioners approved the plan in August. The committee's effort, deemed unprecedented by county and state officials, aimed to thwart the initiative by forcing a countywide referendum.

Under Michigan law, citizens can force a public referendum on a bond proposal by securing at least 15,000 signatures from registered county voters.

After an exhaustive review, County Clerk Larry Kestenbaum validated more than 17,000 of the petition signatures in December. But a vote is not mandatory and is within the county board's discretion.

The board could have placed the matter on the next general election ballot or decide not to take any action - as long as it did not push the disputed bond issue in the future, said county corporate counsel Curtis Hedger.

The majority of the commissioners and Guenzel said they felt a referendum would be too costly and would likely fail given the petition drive's support and the public's overwhelming defeat of a \$314 million jail millage in February.

"There is zero percent likelihood it would pass, and there would be little point," said Commissioner Jeff Irwin, D-Ann Arbor. "The public took a pretty strong stance the last time we put it to a vote, and it would behoove us to take a step back."

Commissioner Wes Prater, D-Saline, voiced the lone opposition.

"Enough people signed the petitions and the folks did it because they wanted a referendum. They should get it," he said.

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