

Bond plan may add 96 jail cells - County board proposal similar to failed '05 plan

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News Staff Reporters

Washtenaw County officials have revived a plan to sell bonds to finance an expansion of the chronically overcrowded Washtenaw County Jail.

The plan to sell \$22 million in bonds that would be paid back partially with savings from cutting the county subsidy for sheriff's patrols is similar a proposal that was dropped last year after a citizen petition drive would have forced it to a public referendum. The plan would add 96 beds to the jail.

The new proposal may face similar opposition. Charles Ream, a Scio Township trustee who helped lead the petition drive, said this morning that he was stunned that the county board would pass a similar proposal, especially just weeks before the board turns over and new members take office.

"This is bizarre that they would try to do the same thing again," he said. "One of the big problems that county voters have with the commission is that (it) constantly does what the people have indicated through a vote that they don't want them to do."

Sheriff Dan Minzey also voiced concern about the proposal this morning, saying it looked too similar to the plan submitted a year ago and didn't do enough to address the scope of the overcrowding problem.

Under this plan, "if the goal is to renovate the facility and add that space, we met that goal," he said. "But if the goal is to alleviate overcrowding, then we have not accomplished that goal."

The new plan proposed by County Administrator Bob Guenzel's won an initial endorsement on Wednesday from the county Board of Commissioners, which passed a resolution in committee in support. The \$21,675,000 in capital bonds would be paid off over 20 years with annual installments of \$1.6 million that would come from capital reserves and anticipated savings in police services contracts.

The proposal is part of the county's 20-year space plan that's been under development for a year and emphasizes improvements to the jail and the 14-A District Court as immediate priorities.

The board passed the measure Wednesday by a 9-1 vote with only Commissioner Mark Ouimet, R-Scio Township, in opposition. Commissioner Ronnie Peterson, D-Ypsilanti, raised multiple concerns about funding, but excused himself before the vote and returned a few minutes afterward with a warm beverage.

Peterson later said he was battling a sinus infection and clarified that while he supported needed expansion of the jail and improvements to the court, he doubted that 96 more beds was a long-term solution to overcrowding. He also questioned the wisdom of relying on anticipated savings from police contracts that are no guarantee for the duration of the 20-year debt.

"It's \$21 million indebtedness on a strategy that's not solid. That's not chump change," Peterson said.

Guenzel, who will be working with at least three new commissioners in January, said he wanted to get some commitment from the current board on a plan that he says sets a clear direction and provides a framework for future boards to make critical decisions on infrastructure.

The proposal is less than the \$30 million bond initiative the board passed in August 2005 to add 96 jail beds and construct a new district court on the former HVA site. The board later rescinded that plan after a citizen's group garnered more than 17,000 certified petition signatures in less than a month to force a vote.

Petition supporters said the bond initiative was too similar to a \$314 million jail and courts millage request that voters overwhelmingly defeated in February 2005. They also objected to using funds previously designated for police services in communities that contract with the sheriff's department.

Guenzel said this plan is different because it blended savings from the police services contracts (\$2.5 million beginning in 2008) with capital reserves (\$1.2 million annually, given current commitments). However, he didn't downplay possible opposition even though many of the townships have since signed long-term policing contracts and acknowledge the need to address overcrowding.

"I don't underestimate the sheriff and some of the township folks who gathered a lot of signatures in a very short amount of time, but I don't think we'll see the same type of community opposition because many people recognize the need," he said.

Commissioner Stephen Solowczuk, R-Saline, said it was time to move expansion plans forward with or without Minzey's approval because criminals are being turned away from the jail due to overcrowding.

"This is just as important, or even more important, public safety issue (than patrols) and we'd be negligent as county commissioners to not support this. We have to do what's right," he said.

He and other commissioners pointed out that bulk of construction costs in the bond was for modernizing jail infrastructure such as security, mechanical, electrical and emergency systems, as well as medical, kitchen and laundry services. Should further expansion of jail beds be necessary in the future, improvements in those key areas would already be taken care of, they argued.

Ouimet, who also was the lone commissioner to vote against the previous bond initiative, said the hitch for him, and many constituents in outlying areas, is using money previously earmarked for police services to fund the expansion.

"If we can get that piece resolved, I think we can move forward intact. But until we do that, it will become a hurdle in out-county communities and it will be difficult to move forward on," he said.

Commissioners are expected to discuss the issue again tonight at a previously scheduled work session, and will vote on final approval at their next official board meeting Nov. 15.

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