

Citizens' group won't push for public vote on new jail bond

Ann Arbor News, The (MI) (Published as Ann Arbor News (MI)) - December 11, 2006

- Page: B1
- Readability: >12 grade level (Lexile: 1570)

POLITICAL

NOTEBOOK

By changing plan, commissions can 'checkmate' petition drive, spokesman says

News Staff Reporter

Washtenaw County's \$21 million bond plan to expand the overcrowded jail will not face the same opposition from citizens who thwarted a previous initiative by demanding a countywide referendum.

Leaders of the Citizens to Save Our Sheriff Committee, or S.O.S., discussed reconstituting shortly after the county first announced plans early last month to fund a 96-bed expansion and infrastructure overhaul at the jail.

The grass-roots group of township officials, Washtenaw County Sheriff's deputies and community activists collected more than 23,000 petition signatures in about 30 days late last summer after Washtenaw County commissioners approved a \$29.9 million bond plan to expand the jail and improve court security.

The 17,000 signatures ultimately certified by the County Clerk's office were well above the what Michigan law requires for citizens to force bond proposals to a public vote. But since it wasn't mandatory, the county board opted to rescind the bond proposal rather than have it rebuked by voters at the polls.

The issue appeared dead, but commissioners approved a new initiative that is different in price and scope, and therefore does not fall under the same constraints for a public vote, they said.

It's a strategic checkmate, said Chuck Ream, a Scio Township trustee who acted as spokesman for the grass-roots committee.

"We know full well we could do it again, but there's just no reason to because they've short-circuited the democratic process that was created there," he said. "The voters said if you make a bond plan for the jail you have to put it to the people. Regrettably, there will be no vote and there is no point to push for another one when they can simply come back with a third proposal. They've won."

County Commissioner Jeff Irwin, D-Ann Arbor, disagreed, saying the board heard the citizens' call to explore more alternatives to incarceration before resorting to bricks and mortar. They've since reauthorized funding for community corrections programs and established a specialized team that intercepts inmates that could be referred to mental health or drug treatment initiatives outside the jail.

"The message I heard from the petition drive was that the public wants the county to fully exhaust all the opportunities to divert people from the jail through alternative programming and put all the tools in the judge's hands to reduce the need to use the jail as a punishment," he said. "It's why we went back to the drawing board."

Notables

* The first of what are expected to be multiple challengers to embattled Washtenaw County Sheriff Dan Minzey recently filed for candidacy in the 2008 election.

The Committee to elect Jerry Clayton filed paperwork with the Washtenaw County Clerk's Office last week. Clayton becomes one of the first candidates to emerge for an election almost two years away and the only declared challenger to Minzey, a Democrat in his second term.

Clayton, of Ypsilanti Township, is a retired Sheriff's lieutenant and executive with Lamberth Consulting, a Pennsylvania-based firm that provides racial profiling assessments, training and communication services to universities, governments and civil rights groups.

Commissioner Leah Gunn, D-Ann Arbor, who as recently as last week accused Minzey of breaking the law by not exercising his statutory authority to reduce prison sentences by one-third to alleviate jail overcrowding, is listed as the committee treasurer.

Saline Police Chief Paul Bunten, a former Ann Arbor Police captain who has taken leadership roles with area police chiefs and impressed county officials by heading the final months of the successful 800 MHz emergency radio millage campaign, has not denied rumors of his interest in the position. Some speculate he could file for candidacy as early as January.

* The first bill introduced by State Rep. Pam Byrnes, D-Lyndon Township, to pass the State House was recently signed into law by Gov. Jennifer Granholm. The bill gives municipalities more control over how they spend transportation dollars allocated by the state.

Byrnes, who attended the bill-signing last week with Chelsea City Manager Mike Steklac, said Steklac often lobbied her for more flexibility and discretion in road fund spending. The bill also establishes a pilot program for communities to combine local street and major street funds for needed projects.

This is an occasional feature focusing on local and state politics. Have info or a suggestion for a topic? Art Aisner can be reached at aaisner@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6823.

• *Record: 0416483854*

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