

Scott Commissioners want \$11 million jail plan; County Council to determine affordability

Written by George Browning
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With one motion, Scott County Commissioners set their stamp of approval on an \$11 million plan for a new jail at a joint meeting of Commissioners and County Councilmen on Wednesday morning, April 3.

That action doesn't necessarily mean that's what the end product will be, however, nor how much it will cost.

Commissioners are well aware that a new facility to house prisoners has been needed in Scott County for a long, long time. That span stretches back to when the present jail facility was opened for business in the late 1980s. At that time, the facility offered 36 beds. When the jail population began expanding, available bed space was increased to 65, and that figure is what past sheriffs and current Sheriff Dan McClain have tried to maintain.

Overall, jail population in the United States has increased 300% since 1980 mostly because of harsher penalties in drug-related cases. On Wednesday, April 3, the day of the Commissioners' joint meeting with the County Council, the jail population included 107 inmates. Another 36 were being housed at the Clark County Jail in Jeffersonville, the facility most often requested to take overflow.

As of Monday, April 8, the jail had 117 inmates and another 32 incarcerated at other facilities.

That overflow count has worried current Commissioners for some months. To pay that bill, about \$35 per day per prisoner, funds in Jail COIT (County Option Income Tax) have been tapped. Jail COIT also finances costs at the facility, but, as noted during the joint meeting, Jail COIT was originally intended to be saved to build a new jail.

As prisoner count is expected to increase again this year and with over \$150,000 already having been spent from January to March, overflow costs alone could reach upwards to \$800,000. Jail COIT could amount to around \$1.309 million collected this year if the economy continues to improve, and it has steadily increased over the years, figures showed.

But it was no wonder Commissioners looked grim as these figures were presented to the County Council, which did not look any happier to receive them.

The design plans that Commissioners want will add 130 beds in a new wing to sit east of the present center. The current center will be reworked to accommodate 80 beds, bringing the county's total to 195.

It also adds a basement, in which storage space, an evidence room, a training area, and an expanded laundry facility will be housed. The old building will have expanded office space for the sheriff and his staff as well as a larger process facility for persons newly arrested and a kitchen designed to handle the larger population.

It will also allow Sheriff Dan McClain to classify his prisoners. He explained that the current jail is too small to effectively house non-violent offenders separate of violent offenders.

Better protection will also be provided for jailers, thanks to the design. Supervision will be more centralized, while cameras will cover wider areas in the jail. Consequently, fewer new personnel will be needed.

Joseph Mrak, Senior Vice President of RQAW Corporation, said the last study his architectural firm performed for Commissioners, added that two- and four-person cells will be located in the new wing; the old cellblocks will be converted into a dorm-like facility. "This last study addressed a 20-year need for the county. These beds can meet those needs but only if the county is willing to utilize community corrections programs to provide alternatives to putting people in jail. You can't build your way out of this problem, and when you look at counties of similar size, Scott

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County is already at the 'high level' of the number of prisoners handled," he said.

Mrak also noted that the plan accommodates possible future expansion.

Upon the official vote taken by the Commissioners to adopt the \$11 million plan, the next actions must be taken by the County Council. This fiscal body must determine if the plan can be adequately financed.

Through comments made by each Councilman, it appeared that there is support for going ahead with some sort of plan to increase the jail's size, if not back the plan approved that morning. Eric Gillespie, County Council President, perhaps summed up the Council's feelings when he told Commissioners, "I'm skeptical of this particular plan because I'm unsure of we can pay for it, but I appreciate the information we've received this morning, and I realize we have new information and new numbers to consider, and that's what we will do."

In his closing comments, Commissioner Mark Hays stated, "I've been (this far on a new jail) once before in 2004. My feelings are that all of us here have our responsibilities. We're not putting a monkey on your back. We're handing you a plate because we all need to work together to resolve this problem."

Commissioner Larry Blevins generated a laugh among his colleagues when he noted, "When we first started working on this plan, I was a young man. Seriously, I'm glad to see us move forward. We spend a ton of money sending prisoners out-of-county, and we need to get a facility to be able to keep these people here. I urge you (Councilmen): Don't look at today, look at the future."

Bob Tobias, President of the Board of Commissioners, said each Commissioner and Councilman "...was elected with the responsibility to do the best job we can and be fiscally sound while doing that job.

This plan is not a 'Cadillac.' I'd say consider your oath of office; you have a responsibility not only to the folks outside the jail but also to those inside the jail. I'm glad we were able to move this far, and now, the ball is in your court. Come back and talk with us."