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San Mateo County Sheriff's Office could be on hook for \$17M to house prisoners

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Posted: 03/15/2011 03:00:00 AM PDT

If Gov. Jerry Brown's budget plan is approved, San Mateo County could be on the hook for up to \$17.1 million annually to house convicts it would typically ship to state prisons, according to Sheriff Greg Munks.

Convicts sentenced to more than one year currently are sent to state prison, Assistant Sheriff Trisha Sanchez said. But under Brown's proposal, the county would have to keep future inmates convicted of "non-violent, non-sexual, non-serious" offenses, many of which involve drug crimes or theft.

In time, the number would add up to about 399 extra inmates a year for San Mateo County's jails, already bursting at the seams, according to the Sheriff's Office. This month, the combined inmate population at the men and women's jails in Redwood City was 995, or almost 20 percent more than the facilities' state-rated capacity of 834 inmates.

Information from the state suggests the counties will receive a set amount -- \$25,000 -- for each offender kept in county jail instead of sent to state prison, regardless of how long they stay, Sanchez said.

"That's what they're telling us at this point," she said. "But nothing's been finalized."

The Sheriff's Office determined that the average prison sentence for the types of offenders who might remain in the county jail would be 399 days, according to a March 14 memo Munks sent to the Board of Supervisors' Criminal Justice Committee. In a worst-case scenario, 399 male inmates incarcerated in

the county jail instead of in state prison at an average daily expense of \$169.92 each for 399 days would cost the county more than \$27.1 million a year. And the state would reimburse the county less than \$10 million, according to Munks' calculations.

Sanchez said after Monday's Criminal Justice Committee meeting that while Brown's plan "makes sense in concept," it puts the county in the position of having to scramble to find more than \$17 million to cover the difference.

The Sheriff's Office also would need to figure out where to house the extra inmates in the next few years before a new jail with 748 beds is built.

In theory, Brown's proposal assumes that local governments will deal with the possible influx of inmates by changing the way they work with them and perhaps incorporating more programs for diversion and substance-abuse treatment.

"They want us to think about alternatives to incarceration," said Sanchez, adding that the courts would have to decide to skip jail because the county wouldn't want to release any inmates who would "pose a risk to public safety."

The Sheriff's Office is also looking at its 116-bed La Honda Medium Security facility as a possible "safety valve" to relieve overcrowding, Sanchez said. The

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facility has been empty since it was closed in 2003.

It's not an ideal solution, said Sanchez, noting that its remote location makes transporting inmates there expensive and that the facility is costly to operate -- about \$5.2 million a year.

With so many variables at work, the ultimate impacts of the state budget changes are unknown, Sanchez said. If Brown's budget prevails, she said the county would begin keeping about 33 inmates a month.

"It's not like the prison doors would be opened when the new budget happens," she said.

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