

Printed from THE DAILY JOURNAL, dtd. 09/14/2011

County stops short of new jail agreement

September 14, 2011, 03:21 AM By Michelle Durand Daily Journal Staff

County officials appear partial to a new jail in which the top floor is left unfinished until the space is needed but stopped short of agreeing yesterday after the newest supervisor asked for one more study session.

"I am not going to be able to make a good decision without some more information from other stakeholders," said Supervisor Dave Pine during a two-and-half-hour jail planning study session.

Pine joined the board during a special election in May and said he was frustrated because yesterday was the first time in four months the entire board has had the chance for a group discussion on a new jail. He also cited Supervisor Don Horsley's relative new status on the board.

Board President Carole Groom called the study session to give Sheriff and his planning team some direction on three different size and configuration options. The meeting also comes just ahead of an Oct. 14 deadline to submit a letter of intent to the state for up to \$100 million in construction funds.

The jail is estimated to cost approximately \$165 million to build followed by up to \$31 million annually in operating costs.

The county has the land — a site on Chemical Way in Redwood City purchased specifically for this project — and the environmental review. Now all it needs is the plan.

The letter does not need to be as specific about the plan as the application due in January but many supervisors and Munks hoped for clarity.

Munks also pointed to state inmate realignment as another factor in deciding, as even the minimum estimate by the state of 241 inmates would leave a small jail over capacity from the first day it opens.

Pine, however, urged at least one more study session before the board decided whether to accept Munks' preferred building plan for a minimum of 760 beds, a much smaller facility with 576 beds or what the sheriff called a "political compromise" in which the larger jail would house only the 576 beds along with an unfinished top floor or wing.

"This is a place where we can find some common ground," Munks said.

The option, known as a shell, allows the county to add cell and bed space later if needed. The space could also house programming or transitional housing — an idea that Supervisor Adrienne Tissier and Service League Executive Director Mike Nevin both lauded as a way to reduce jail population and give inmates tools to assimilate back into the community.

The compromise plan also knocks off about \$10 million from the capital costs.

The price tag was one reason Pine wants more time to discuss alternative ways to reduce bed space and hear from interested parties other than law enforcement.

"The elephant in the room is we don't have any money," Pine said, referencing the jail's estimated \$25 million-plus annual operating expense and the county's ongoing structural deficit. "We unfortunately can't look at criminal justice in isolation."

When District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe said the county government's number one priority is public safety, Pine asked him if he would take a budget cut.

Wagstaffe said he would and said the Board of Supervisors will need to make extremely tough decisions but added that reductions should not be across the board.

The need for a new jail and the money to fund it also led Tissier to mention the need for an economic development person on board and Horsley to revisit the idea of a countywide sales tax increase.

Both Horsley and Jacobs Gibson have publicly questioned Munks' proposed jail plan but yesterday Jacobs Gibson got behind the compromise plan and joined Tissier in seeking some decisions.

"We cannot continue to wait," she said.

Tissier worried that not offering direction yesterday could jeopardize seeking the state money and stall the planning team until January. Groom agreed to find a study session time, preferably before the Oct. 4 board meeting at which time they will consider authorizing Munks to send the letter of intent.

Groom told Pine she was in the same boat two years ago, coming up to speed on an issue that has taken up the better part of a decade and was well discussed by other members of the board. She also told the crowded room her focus in politics has been primarily items like children and building parks.

"But we are not a healthy community if we are not a safe community," she said.

Groom also added that she does not want the county to reopen the minimum security facility in La Honda, which Munks has said is likely if overcrowding isn't eased and the upcoming return of state prisoners is greater than estimated.

"I do not want use to use that facility under any circumstances. For me that has to come off the table," she said.

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