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Majority of San Mateo County supervisors say they intend to vote for big new jail

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A majority of San Mateo County supervisors signaled Tuesday that they intend to vote in favor of building a new jail large enough to house anywhere from 768 to 832 inmates.

Though Supervisor Rose Jacobs Gibson previously questioned why Sheriff Greg Munks needs a maximum-security facility that big for men and women, she softened her stance at the board meeting.

Jacobs Gibson said she could now support such a large jail if the county leaves one of its floors empty and only adds 192 beds there later if they're ultimately needed. Munks had offered such a plan as an option.

Her mind changed the more she heard about the state's budget-cutting "realignment" plans, which include keeping about 400 low-level offenders in the county's jail each year instead of sending them to state prison.

"We currently do not have the ability to provide the quality of services we need," Jacobs Gibson said. "We cannot wait."

Board President Carole Groom and Vice president Adrienne Tissier also said Tuesday they support the sheriff's option plan.

Although the county's jails were designed to accommodate a total of 834 male and female inmates, the average population is usually around 1,100, Munks said Tuesday. Since 2007 the county has discussed the need for an additional jail to avoid overcrowding and to replace the dilapidated 84-bed women's facility. A 4.8-acre site east of

Highway 101 in Redwood City was purchased for the new jail late last

year.

The projected cost to build a 576- to 640-bed jail with an empty floor for possible future use is \$145 million to \$160 million, according to the sheriff's office. Operating it would cost about \$24.9 million a year.

Supervisor Dave Pine, who joined the board less than nine months ago, questioned whether the county could afford a new jail of that size and said he needs more information about alternatives to incarceration and their costs. To balance its budget this year, the county had to dig into its reserves to offset a \$50 million deficit.

"The elephant we face is we don't have any money; in fact we have a \$50 million deficit," Pine said.

Tissier said public safety is at risk the longer the county waits to build the new jail.

"To say that we can't move forward because we don't have any money is not the right answer," Tissier said. "My hope is we never open that top floor for incarcerations. But I'm also not so Pollyannaish to not know the people that are coming back (from the state) are not Boy Scouts."

Supervisor Don Horsley, the county's former sheriff, said he too is concerned about the cost and questioned whether the county is doing enough to reduce the number of inmates waiting for their day

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in court.

After the meeting Horsley said empty floor or not, a jail built big enough for up to 832 beds would be quickly filled with that many inmates.

"It's the easy way out," he said.

Munks initially said the county has an Oct. 14 deadline to apply for state money through AB 900, which created a competitive grant program to fund jail construction projects. But under Pine's questioning, he acknowledged that the county only needs to submit a letter of intent to apply by that date. An application doesn't have to be submitted until January.

At Pine's request, Groom agreed to have a second study session scheduled to focus on sentencing alternatives, such as electronic monitoring and mental health and substance treatment programs. A decision on the jail size would be made after that, she said.

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