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County closer to picking jail option

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San Mateo County is moving closer to picking an option for a new jail in Redwood City nearly five years after Sheriff Greg Munks first called for a new facility due to extensive overcrowding.

A site has already been purchased on Chemical Way on the east side of Highway 101 for \$17 million but county supervisors have been unable to decide how big the facility should be.

Yesterday, a majority of the Board of Supervisors agreed that a larger jail with 576 beds and an unfinished top floor, called option B, should be pursued for the site, despite objections from the board's newest member Dave Pine.

Munks had originally called for building a facility to house an additional 760 inmates but scaled the plan back in other design options over time to satisfy the board. The board had three options from which to pick, with a varying number of beds and related annual costs.

The board heard two hours of testimony in a special study session yesterday so Pine could hear more from the public outside of law enforcement opinions to help him craft his own ideas on how to alleviate the county's overcrowded jails.

Pine, however, disagrees with the majority of the Board of Supervisors.

"Option B is the worst option," Pine said.

Option B calls for the inclusion of a "shell" on the top floor of the building with a minimally finished interior that can be used for a variety of purposes, either providing space for programs or for bunks.

Pine, who was elected to the board in May, said he feared that building a new jail will be hurtful to other county departments and that option B was the worst because of the "shell."

"I'm not comfortable we've looked at other ways to reduce the jail population," Pine said.

Jail facilities are already well past capacity and the county is also preparing for a massive realignment of prisoners from the state to the county.

The county is expected to absorb an additional 240 to 350 new inmates from the state in the coming year.

"We have lived in a constant state of overcrowding and it limits our ability to provide effective programming," Munks told the rest of the board yesterday.

Program space has been taken away for bunks, the sheriff said, due to overcrowding.

The new jail facility is expected to cost \$145 million to \$160 million to construct and about \$25 million a year to maintain.



Bill Silverfarb/Daily Journal
San Mateo County Supervisor Dave Pine, center, will likely vote against the construction of a new jail at the board's next meeting. Most of his colleagues, including Rose Jacobs Gibson, left, and Don Horsley, right, have indicated they would support the construction of a new 576-bed facility in Redwood City east of Highway 101.

Munks is urging the board to make a decision soon to avoid escalating costs related to building the jail and to apply for up to \$300 million in state grants for jail construction.

Supervisors next meet Oct. 4 when they are expected to make a final decision on a jail option.

But Pine made it clear yesterday he would not side with the board's seemingly preferred option.

Pine asked Munks whether the county would ever get serious about "electronic monitoring" for inmates since only three inmates currently have the devices.

Munks said the devices should not be used, however, just to depopulate the jail.

"We will have to do more electronic monitoring because we are not building a big enough jail," Munks said.

During testimony from the public, District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe, judges Beth Freeman and Mark Forcum and the top official in the county's private defender program, John Digiacinto, all offered support for Munks' effort to build a new jail.

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