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San Mateo County sheriff says he can squeeze in 200 more inmates in overcrowded jails for now

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Although San Mateo County's jail system is "severely overcrowded," it still should be able accommodate the additional inmates expected to start arriving this month under the state's prison realignment program, according to Sheriff Greg Munks.

The county's jails were designed to hold a combined maximum of 834 male and female inmates but often exceeds that number, as it did last month with 1,000. Still, Munks said, he could squeeze about 200 more inmates into the facilities.

"I've got 1,200 beds," Munks said. "That's when I run out of beds and make people sleep on the floor," he said.

Overcrowding at the county's jails has been a long-standing problem underscored in a 2004 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury report that also recommended the dilapidated women's facility be replaced. Munks has repeatedly told the Board of Supervisors that overcrowding makes it harder to maintain a safe and secure facility.

In recent years, the county has been planning for a new jail to house both men and women. It bought a 4.8-acre site east of Highway 101 in Redwood City at the end of last year for the new jail, which will complement the Maguire Correctional Facility downtown and allow the women's facility on Maple Street to close.

The new jail's proposed size has been the focus of ongoing debate. Munks has insisted the county needs a 768-bed jail to meet the expected growth in the inmate population, but some supervisors have

pointed out the county

can't afford too large a facility and questioned whether enough is being done to reduce the population through diversion programs and monitoring of released inmates.

But California's budget-driven decision to keep some low-level offenders out of state prison by serving time in county jails -- starting today -- bolstered Munks' argument that bigger is better. The sheriff's office has estimated that 300 to 400 more inmates eventually could be added to the jail population as a result of the state decision.

On Wednesday, four of the five supervisors indicated a willingness to compromise by allowing a jail with enough floors to accommodate 768 to 832 beds, but keeping one of the floors empty so only 576 to 640 beds would go in unless it's determined later more are needed. The plan will come before the supervisors for a vote at their meeting Tuesday.

The estimated cost for the new jail with an empty floor, known as the Plan B option, is \$145 million to \$160 million.

Supervisor Dave Pine said he remains unconvinced the jail has to be that large.

"The argument against option B is that in a time of budget scarcity and shrinking budgets, I don't believe we can add \$140 million to our budget to build and staff a jail," he told The Daily News. "What we ought to do is see if we can keep our prison population in check and build a more moderately

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sized jail."

Under the Plan B option, the combined state-approved capacity of Maguire and the new jail would be 1,296 inmates.

Munks said even though the current facilities could absorb up to 1,200 inmates, the county is vulnerable to lawsuits over crowded conditions. If the county can show it's trying to deal with the problem by building a new jail, that might offer some protection in court, he said.

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