

# Prison overhaul is county's opportunity

Officials, state share goal of reducing number of inmates

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San Mateo County officials say that the forthcoming realignment of California's penal system represents an opportunity for the county to correct mistakes the state has made for years, including what Sheriff Greg Munks called a prison-building "binge."

At a special meeting last week with local criminal-justice representatives and the Board of Supervisors, officials voiced the goal of reducing the number of people in county jails, which is set to increase as realignment redirects a wider swath of criminals into county jails. Happily, new rules changes give counties the power to release parolees after just six months and let most inmates out of jail on good behavior after serving just half their time.

"We got the state of California's problems and we have to understand that the policies they pursued in building their penological institutions have been a failure and we've been asked to do something better," said John Digiacinto, the head of the county bar association's private defender program. "I firmly believe we can."

Beginning this month, new legislation will redirect certain inmates to county jails instead of state prisons.

At a Wednesday meeting between supervisors and criminal-justice officials to discuss the county's planned new jail, Supervisor Dave Pine suggested that the sheriff could use new powers to roll out electronic monitoring systems — anklets police use to track offenders — as an alternative to incarceration.

Munks called the anklets, which just six of 5,000 adults on probation currently use, an "effective tool," but said he would not challenge a court decision to keep someone in custody.

The county also could reduce the number of people awaiting trial in jail by getting police reports out to defense more quickly, District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe said.

Pine highlighted a report commissioned by the county in July that suggested far more could be done to reduce the number of pretrial inmates. Pine urged the sheriff to implement a more effective means of evaluating whether pretrial inmates truly need to await their court date behind bars.

But Munks and Presiding Judge Beth Freeman quarreled with that report's findings. The sheriff said San Mateo actually has fewer pretrial inmates than comparable counties, although Pine questioned that data.

Digiacinto said big inmate reductions might result by reforming the county's bail system, which he said often jails people simply because they cannot afford bail.

Such defendants swell the pretrial population, yet rarely go to trial because once they've racked up credit for time served, they prefer to plead guilty and go home immediately, he said.

"Basically, the rich get out and the poor don't," added Sara Matlin, chair of the American Civil Liberties Union North Peninsula Chapter.

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## Prison break

Impact of realignment, which began Saturday:

- 600** Additional offenses for which criminals can end up in county jail instead of state prison
- 15** Years of maximum jail sentences judges will hand down
- 350** Additional inmates jails will take on in the next two years
- 5,600** Adults who will be on probation, an increase from 5,000
- \$4.2 million** State money allotted to the county
- \$1.1 million** State money approved so far for new county personnel in year one
- Unknown** Cost of realignment for the county

Source: Sheriff Greg Munks, probation chief Stuart Forrest, Presiding Judge Beth Freeman



**Going free:** The full cost to San Mateo County of the prison realignment is unclear, but officials say they are looking forward to the relief of the overburdened penal system.

## Supervisors expected to approve new jail Tuesday

Faced with realignment and overcrowded jails, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors is expected to approve a greatly shrunken design for the new jail Tuesday.

The design being proposed by Sheriff Greg Munks calls for 576 beds — down from an earlier 1,400-bed proposal — with room for an additional 256 beds on a vacant floor.

Munks said this compromise approach was downsized following complaints by county supervisors about cost.

At a special session of the board held Wednesday, Munks said the jail's limited size only heightens the need for expanded programs to reduce recidivism, such as job training; educational, religious, mental health; and substance abuse services that will be offered through the jail.

"We're not just looking at a jail to incarcerate people but to change people's lives," Munks said. While admitting that such programs have yet to yield any significant impact on recidivism, he said they are "the

right thing to do."

Supervisor Don Horsley said the new jail "could be a model for the state of California and even the nation."

Supervisor Rose Jacobs Gibson said, "To help people on the outside we need adequate programming on the inside."

But Supervisor Dave Pine, the man who called for Wednesday's meeting, questioned whether, in uncertain economic times, the county could afford a jail that's expected to cost \$145 million to \$160 million to build and \$35 million a year to run.

While the majority of supervisors voiced support for Munks' latest jail plan, Pine, who acknowledged that the county needs a new jail, said the design does not provide space for the progressive programming Munks envisions.

"If we want extra space for programs, we should just go ahead and build that in," he said.

Up to \$300 million in state grants is available for the jail's construction, money Horsley said the county had a good chance of winning.

Munks repeatedly urged supervisors not to delay the jail's approval, saying material costs are rising and his jail planning unit is using up funds.

Tens of millions of dollars have already been pumped into the project, including \$17 million for land east of U.S. Highway 101 on Chemical Way.

While the exact design, relocation of tenants and site prep work all lay ahead, if the jail stays on its timeline, it could open by December 2014, Munks said. — Niko Kyriakou



Horsley



Pine