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San Mateo County optimistic about realignment

March 02, 2011, 02:32 AM By Michelle Durand Daily Journal Staff

County officials are optimistic plans to shift certain state responsibilities to local governments will give them greater discretion but worry the so-called realignment won't come with necessary money attached.

"Counties, in fact, can probably do a better job ... and better protect them from the annual state budget process," said County Manager David Boesch.

Gov. Jerry Brown has called realignment — essentially the shifting of responsibility from state to local hands — a key to solving California's \$26.6 billion budget crisis. But at a special joint meeting Tuesday with the Board of Supervisors, its legislative committee and the county's state representatives, the concern is the creation of a local financial quagmire while fixing the state.

San Mateo County is already grappling with its own structural deficit and officials yesterday said underfunding shifted services will make the situation more keen. Regardless, the consensus was that realignment "may well prove successful," as Supervisor Don Horsley said.

However, they said the state cannot hurt counties while putting its own financial house in order. San Mateo County's annual budget is approximately \$1.8 billion and Supervisor Rose Jacobs Gibson, chair of the legislative committee, said there is no room to absorb the extra responsibilities and staff needed to manage the realigned programs unless the state also sends money.

A critical example for local officials is a proposal to send more than 30,000 nonviolent offenders from state prisons back to counties for housing in jails or supervision by probation departments.

On Monday, Brown revised his proposal to keep more inmates in state facilities and shift less law enforcement responsibilities to counties. For example, rather than do away with the Criminal Division of Juvenile Justice and shipping juvenile offenders back home, they will remain in state custody. In return, though, counties would get less money for other programs like victim counseling and officer training.

Counties, however, would get more funding than initially proposed for housing inmates beyond three years.

Sheriff Greg Munks said he was happy with the amendments that will drop the number of prisoners transferred from approximately 40 to 33. However, the state will only pay one-third of the daily rate for inmates, leaving the county to make up the difference, he said.

Assemblywoman Fiona Ma, D-San Francisco, said in her discussions with the receiver over state prison overcrowding, that one possibility raised was the shutting of those doors to new inmates. The result will be extra pressure on jails, like the overcrowded facilities in San Mateo County.

One bright spot may be changes to Assembly Bill 900, legislation which offers counties money to build new jails. The county previously turned down up to \$100 million because it came with the caveat of housing state inmates. The bill may now be tweaked to remove some of those strings and San Mateo County, which plans to build a new jail in Redwood City, might benefit.

Probation Department head Stu Forrest said the county won't be that hard hit by juvenile offenders being returned to local supervision but outlined legal and technical challenges in shifting jurisdictional responsibility.

A bigger challenge Forrest raised is the plan to return parolees to local supervision, half of which have failed probation and parole. The department has already shrunk and extra workload would leave it "severely tested," he said.

"We're building a structure on very weak legs," he said.

Health and Human Services officials similarly worried that realignment without appropriate funding and proposed state budget cuts will leave the county strained and residents without care. Social services will also be impacted by the planned inmate release because they will need at least initial help with food, housing and employment, said HSA Director Beverly Beasley Johnson.

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