

Despite crowding, county fights early jail releases

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

Calling it an emergency situation, an Oakland County Board of Commissioners committee vehemently opposed a legislative bill which would allow early release of inmates in county jails.

Acting on the request of Oakland County Assistant Prosecutor Richard Thompson, the seven-member general government committee voted to send the resolution to the Michigan Senate judiciary committee, which was scheduled to discuss it yesterday.

The bill calls for releasing inmates when jails are overcrowded, regardless of the inmates' prior sentences.

"This bill," said Thompson, "at-

tempts to relieve jail population overload by using diversionary programs — which the courts can already do — and by now giving the authority to release prisoners to the chief of the circuit court, the judge who sentenced the prisoner or the county sheriff."

"This bill is playing a cruel joke on the citizens. It's greasing the revolving door to revolve faster," he added.

OPPONENTS of the bill believe it will reduce the jail population at the expense of Michigan residents.

Because the judiciary committee was slated to meet this week, Oakland's general government committee sent its resolution to Lansing immediately, rather than waiting for the full

board to meet June 17.

The resolution asked that all counties, such as Oakland, which are under court order to reduce their jail populations be exempt from the bill.

OAKLAND COUNTY has until Aug. 27 to comply with a court order to reduce its jail population to 450 inmates per day.

Presently, the population often looms above 500. Among other things, the jail must also reduce the number of inmates allowed in the receiving tank from 82 to 51 per day.

Since December, a 19-member criminal justice subcommittee has been studying ways to reduce the jail population.

Thompson called the state bill unconstitutional. "Under the constitution, only the governor can commute sentences," Thompson said.

"This bill gives the circuit and district judges as well as the sheriff the power to commute sentences," he said. "We have to give a signal to the state legislature that that is not the way to handle the crime problem."

THE HOUSE of Representatives passed the bill 78-23.

Among those who opposed it were Reps. Douglas Cruce, R-Troy; James Delebaugh, R-Birmingham; Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield; Ruth McNamee, R-Birmingham; and L. Jean Willoughby, R-Bloomfield Hills. Supporting the bill were Reps. W.V. (Sandy) Brotherton, R-Farmington, and Joe Forbes, D-Southfield.

Fessler, a member of the House Judiciary Committee, called the bill a "poor piece of legislation."

"Section 7 of the bill gives a county sheriff the right to reduce sentences of all inmates by up to 30 percent if the jail is overcrowded. That's not the job of the sheriff," Fessler said.

"When you add that to good time, you could end up with a tremendous reduction of population but with a lot of people out on the streets. It just increases the numbers of early releases, and then someone else inherits the problems," he said.

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