

Refurbishing old county jail draws fire

By Suzie Rollins Singer
Staff writer

Retired construction company owner John Parmeter is confident that he can refurbish the former Oakland County Jail in Pontiac for less than \$1 million. County and Pontiac city officials, however, are dead set against the idea, saying it will cost the county "many millions more" and isn't worth it.

"I'm representing the taxpayers. I went over a week in the old jail (studying it), and my intent is to be practical, not political about this," Parmeter said.

"The jail is a secure, beautiful old building that's too expensive to tear down and needs to be used as a jail," he said.

PARMETER RECENTLY presented his case to the Oakland County Jail Study Committee and the board of commissioners' Public Services Committee.

But his efforts met opposition from others around the county who have studied the jail.

"When the decision was made 15 years ago to build the new jail (the current one in the county complex), it was decided that the old jail be torn down," Deputy County Executive William Spinnelli said.

"The building has had three or four owners, but it has not had heat in it for years," Spinnelli said. "The plumbing was shot before the building closed."

"The city is dead set against refurbishing it. He (Parmeter) said he had all his trades people in there, and that he can fix it up at an economically feasible price. But there are a lot of other people who don't agree," said Spinnelli.

Because Parmeter's request got a 2 support vote from the public services committee, it will be studied more thoroughly by the county facilities and engineering department.

PARMETER SAID he could refurbish the jail for less than \$1 million, only if specific conditions were met.

"There are a lot of ifs," Parmeter said. "It could be done for that price — if it's minimum security, if it's a ladies' prison, if it has 86 inmates, if it has a self-sufficient kitchen, and if 50 trustees are on work release."

"A new jail for 86 persons costs \$45,000-\$50,000 per bed," Parmeter estimated. "Refurbishing the old jail is \$15,000 per bed."

Parmeter's presentation has been met with mixed emotions from commissioners. The two Democrats from Pontiac wanted to quash the idea, contending that Pontiac city officials aren't interested in fixing up the jail at a high cost. They say it's an unsafe

building which needs too much work.

"I think the opposition is pretty clear. When we built the new jail in 1972, everyone wanted that jail torn down," Commissioner Hubert Price, D-Pontiac, said.

COMMISSIONER Susan Kuhn, R-Clio, disagreed and asked that the state Department of Corrections be contacted for its opinion.

Spinnelli added, "after the proposal is reviewed and the Department of Corrections is contacted, we'll find out if the cells are even up to code size and what else has to be brought up to code."

The idea of refurbishing the old jail was born as county officials cast around for more jail space in the wake of a federal court ruling that the new jail is overcrowded.

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Headlee has new tax petition drive

Richard Headlee has returned to the public eye, this time heading a petition drive supporting voter approval for new taxes, tax increases or tax shifts.

Calling his petition the "Voter's Choice" petition, the Farmington Hills insurance executive and 1982 Republican hopes to garner 304,000 valid signatures by June 1984 to put his plan on the November '84 ballot.

It would allow voters to decide whether they want the power to approve or deny tax-like requests.

Persons wishing to obtain petitions should write to Voter's Choice for '84, P.O. Box 484, Armada, Mich. 48005-0484.

Headlee's petition drive is a retaliation to Gov. James Blanchard's 33-percent income tax increase approved by the legislature last month.

In a recent interview with the Observer & Eccentric, Headlee said he was confident the Voter's Choice proposal would get enough votes to be put on the ballot and be approved by voters.

Headlee has had success with getting constitutional amendments approved. The Farmington Hills resident spearheaded the most recent successful Michigan constitutional amendment drive in 1978.

The Headlee amendment limited the growth of the state budget by fixing the ratio between the budget for fiscal year 1978-79 and the total personal income in Michigan for the calendar year 1977.

It also provides for a reduction of property tax millage rates when the increase in community state equalized property valuations exceeds the increase in the consumer price index for the previous year.

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