

Privately run jail 'great idea' — Murphy

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy is cheering on efforts of a Dearborn businessman to build a private jail for misdemeanor offenders. "It's a great idea. He's going at it systematically in light of the attorney general's opinion," Murphy said. Chip Acey, president of a tool company, is proposing to build — and operate — a 448-bed minimum security jail in southern Wayne County. It would house non-violent offenders who are sentenced to jail but promptly released because the Wayne County Jail is overcrowded with felony defendants.

But state attorney General Frank J. Kelley, in an Oct. 21 opinion, said jails may not be privately operated though they may be privately built.

"WHETHER MICHIGAN does it this time or another time — it's still a better way," said Murphy, a Republican who advocates contracting government work to business whenever it will cut cost.

"It (Acey's plan) doesn't take away from the sheriff's responsibility. The sheriff still sets the standards," Murphy said.

"We've talked to Chip Acey. I don't see a problem" with the practical side of operating a jail, Murphy said.

Murphy has proposed that Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties hire a private company to build a jail that all three counties can use for minimum security offenders.

Wayne County prosecutor John O'Hair said in an interview he would consider the idea. Under Murphy's proposal, the counties would pay the private contractor on a per-diem basis. Several states — Tennessee, Florida, Minnesota, California and Texas among them — reportedly already have privately-operated jails.

Attorney General Frank J. Kelley's opinion said jails may not be privately operated though they may be privately built. And Wayne County Sheriff Robert Ficano opposes privately operated jails.

FRANK WILKERSON, Acey's lawyer, said, "We've already started discussing this with legislators." He will seek to change the law to allow private firms to operate jails. Wilkerson was administrator of the Wayne County Jail in the days when William Lucas was sheriff. Wilkerson also sought the 1986 Democratic nomination for county executive. He is now in private legal practice.

But Robert Ficano, current Wayne County sheriff, opposes privately-operated jails. "There have been too many questions that have never been answered. What happens if it goes bankrupt? What about liability? The U.S. Supreme Court says civil rights violations cannot be delegated to private industry — so if there is an offense, a municipality or the county is still responsible," Ficano said.

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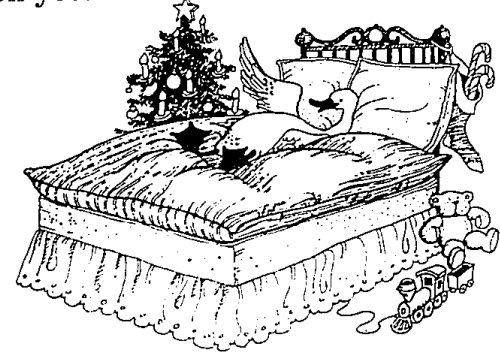
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