

New jail cells filling up - county eyes alternatives

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Less than two years after opening an \$18 million jail addition, Oakland County is again approaching the prospect of overcrowding.

Having felt the sting of previous federal court action to eliminate overcrowding, jail and county officials insist the answer is innovation — not adding expensive new jail cells.

The prospect of jail overcrowding was raised last week at a meeting of the Consent Judgment Jail Advisory Group, the committee formed as part of the response to a federal court order.

The group — composed of the prosecutor, the sheriff and representatives of the board of commissioners, the county executive and the courts — was advised that the jail population at times was nearing 1,470, a figure uncomfortably close to its 1,325 maximum.

That population is not even close to the figures that prompted officials to build the 480-bed addition to the jail that officially opened in April, 1988.

BUT THE UNEXPECTEDLY high jail population "certainly bears watching," said Steven N. Andrews, chief judge of the Oakland circuit court and a member of the advisory group.

The possibility of jail overcrowding was almost unthinkable last year. The jail addition — built at a cost of nearly \$17,000 per bed — was expected to provide adequate space into the foreseeable future.

At one time, Sheriff John F. Nichols even talked with county commissioners about making unused cells available for rent to Wayne

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— Billy J. Nolin
County undersheriff

County or other communities short of jail space.

It's not that Oakland is in the grips of any crime wave, said Undersheriff Billy J. Nolin. The county doesn't necessarily have more criminals than its neighbors.

"But judges have been a lot tougher," Nolin said. "Offenders who otherwise would be released on probation are now getting time in the county slammer."

RATHER THAN ADD jail cells, Nichols advised the group overcrowding could be eased by expanding two existing cost-efficient programs — the boot camp and work-release.

The boot camp program was initiated on a pilot basis in the fall, with 16 nonviolent inmates. They were mostly young probation violators given the option of going to boot camp or incarceration in the regular jail.

They lived in tents under military regimen . . . wake up at 4:45 a.m., lights out at 10 p.m., lots of work and no television.

The first class of "Nichols" boots, as they are sometimes nicknamed, graduated in early November. "It was an unqualified success,"

said county commissioner Donald W. Jensen, R-Birmingham, a member of the advisory group. "Only three dropped out."

But the program's success can also be measured in qualitative terms, said Nolin. "The people who did go through the boot camp came out with a sense of pride."

"At graduation, one father said that was the only time he had ever heard his son say 'Yes, sir' or 'No, sir.'"

Only time will tell, Nolin acknowledged. But he and others are optimistic graduating inmates developed enough pride to stay out of trouble — and out of jail.

BUT EXPANDING the boot camp program will take more resources than the pilot project, said county commissioner Richard D. Kuhn Jr., R-Drayton Plains, chairman of the advisory group. "For one thing, tents aren't suitable in winter. We'll need a building rather than tents."

The group passed two resolutions calling for review and possible expansion of the boot camp and the existing work-release program.

The work-release program is a real winner, Kuhn said. "No government program breaks even, but work-release comes close to paying for itself."

Under the work-release program, about 120 inmates, including women, are given their freedom during working hours after which they must report back to a special section of the jail.

'Schools of choice' State offers funds for pilot programs

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The State Board of Education will promote "schools of choice" between public school districts as well as within them.

The eight-member board said it will ask the Michigan Legislature to provide incentive funds for pilot programs. The board itself vowed last week to give technical assistance to districts wishing to develop choice programs.

Last week's vote was unanimous although lame-duck Democrat Rolie Hoggood of Taylor clearly had reservations. "The Legislature should make equity happen before it makes choice happen," said Hoggood.

Noting that some of the state's 560 school districts spend as little as \$2,500 per pupil while others spend \$8,000-plus, Hoggood fears students will abandon poor districts and flock to rich ones.

"I don't see them (legislators) making any strides on equity," said Barbara Roberts Mason, a Lansing Democrat. "At the same time, I see students who could benefit from choice."

UNDER "SCHOOLS of choice," parents may choose to enroll their children in any school.

The idea is favored by businesspeople, in particular, as a method of breaking the monopoly of the neighborhood public school, and forcing schools to compete in the marketplace for students.

The plan was pioneered in New York City's District 4, Spanish Harlem, where administrator Sy Fillegel credits it with raising junior high student performance dramatically. Some schools even developed specialties such as science and the performing arts.

Minnesota adopted it gradually beginning in 1987, made it mandatory in 1988 for districts with more than 1,000 students, and implemented it statewide last fall.

IN MICHIGAN, the idea is promoted by Metropolitan Affairs Corp. (MAC), a research and education think tank which shares staff with the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

"We are happy to hear that step being taken," said John Amberger, executive director of SEMCOG and president of MAC. "We've not advocated inter-district or inter-county or any particular plan. But it's absolutely moving in the right direction."

In August, national AFT president Albert Shanker endorsed "choice" in an East Lansing appearance.

The state House of Representatives in February rejected, 61-36, a voluntary intra-district schools of choice plan. Politically, at this point, the prospect of an inter-district choice bill appear even dimmer. And with state revenues falling, the prospects of finding money for pilot programs is dimmer yet.

HOPGOOD, AN American Fed-

eration of Teachers staff member, lost an amendment that would put funding equity ahead of schools of choice.

"Rollie, you are the father of this goal. I applaud your passion," said Barbara Dumouchelle, a Republican from Grosse Ile. "But this (choice) may be the opportunity for students to seek the equity that politicians have denied them. They would be voting with their feet," she said.

Hoggood had another fear. "Are schools of choice going to be ways to recruit good football teams?"

"They could," said Donald L. Bemis, superintendent of public instruction.

The board's resolution said state-funded pilot programs are needed to work out problems of program planning, the role of parents, pupil transportation, minority balance, counseling, building decision-making, and co-curricular activities, including athletics.

"CHOICE" WAS just one of the goals set by the State Board, which adopted its first set of "common goals" in 1971. Among others:

- Funding equity for students and more equitable tax loads between districts.

- A 90 percent high school graduation rate by the year 2000, including mandatory school attendance to age 18.

- Comprehensive statewide reform of math and science education.

- Strengthening of teacher and administrator preparation.

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