

Hamilton County Commission Consultant says jail should close immediately

BY KENDI ANDERSON

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A consultant told Hamilton County commissioners what they already knew about the county's downtown lockup during Wednesday's commission meeting.

"The jail has outlived its useful life," said Tom Morsch, managing director of PFM, the company hired to consult on the future of the jail. The facility has routinely flunked inspections for the past 10 years.

Morsch told the commissioners that after touring the jail he realized how "clothespins and shoelaces are holding it together."

PFM was hired by the county earlier this year to look at both the downtown jail and the Silverdale facility, which Corrections Corporation of America now operates, to provide the commission with a recommendation on how to proceed.

Morsch said Wednesday the Hamilton County Jail should be shut down and a new processing center should be built for prisoner intake.

He recommended expanding the existing facility at Silverdale from its current 1,062 beds to 1,600 beds, with capacity for further expansion. He said the idea of moving a few courtrooms closer to this facility is on the table.

County Mayor Jim Coppinger said PFM's consultation on the project has involved many in the criminal justice system.

"The only people that haven't had input [have] been the inmates," Coppinger said.

The commission is expected to discuss Morsch's recommendations in its next meeting, and decide if it wants to continue to proceed with PFM as consultants.

A price tag was not mentioned Wednesday, but Coppinger said other ways are available to fund a new jail besides spending tax dollars. He said he anticipates "extremely competitive" interest from companies wanting to build and operate the jail, as CCA's contract with the county is set to expire in April.

"We're trying to do this as cost efficiently as we can," Coppinger said.

Commissioner Warren Mackey said if he had to choose between spending \$100 million on jails or on schools, he'd choose schools, as the school board has expressed the need for at least two new schools in the coming years.

"I don't see Hamilton County having enough money to build the jail and the schools," Mackey said. "We have schools that are in dire need of repair."

"Jails are not designed, and as far as I'm concerned, they should not be comfortable; they should not be pleasant," Mackey said. "If I ran the jail, you wouldn't want to come. You wouldn't get a hot meal. It would be overcrowded. It would be unsafe."

Coppinger said he wants inmates to be treated humanely.

"While [inmates] are in custody of Hamilton County, we want to make sure it is an extremely safe environment and that people are being treated fairly."

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Tom Morsch