

County Jail Overcrowding Cited by State

By JOHN WILSON Staff Writer

Tennessee officials are decertifying the packed Hamilton County Jail, Sheriff John Cupp told the County Commission Wednesday. Sheriff Cupp said decertification "means the state will be paying us \$12 a day for holding their prisoners rather than \$30 a day. "The state told us they are decertifying us because of overcrowding and not enough personnel according to the standards," he said. Peggy Sawyer, the area inspector for the Tennessee Corrections Institute (TCI), said the county will be given time to make corrections after her Dec. 15 surprise visit. She said she then would make a reinspection. She said based on that visit she will decide whether the jail should be decertified, and the final decision will be up to the TCI board. Mrs. Sawyer, of Manchester, wrote in her report, "Due to overcrowding of inmates, (the jail) does not meet standards for showers and toilets or living space requirements." The county jail on Walnut Street is certified for 466 prisoners. On the day the inspector visited it held 575. It has been averaging 582. The count was 515 Wednesday. The sheriff for months has been calling attention to crowded conditions at both the jail on Walnut Street downtown and the Hamilton County Workhouse at Silverdale. He told the commission, "When you have one or two officers with 125 inmates, they are saying it is not safe. We are talking about the fifth and sixth floors where we have our worst people. "When you get 670 people, you have an explosion waiting to happen." Sheriff Cupp said the jail has held as many as 670 prisoners recently. The latest jail count includes 43 prisoners who should be at the workhouse, but there is not space for them there. The workhouse has 138 females and 429 males. It is certified for 128 females and 368 males. Sheriff Cupp said, "Some of the items we can respond to -- such as a dirty kitchen. We have already acted and it is now spotless. "It will be up to the County Commission on the personnel. But the most difficult problem is the overcrowding. We have no control over that." Sheriff Cupp said even if it is possible to build upwards at the county jail, "the kitchen is maxed out and the laundry is maxed out." He said the jail kitchen was designed to provide for 466 inmates, but is serving some 2,000 meals a day (counting meals for employees unable to leave the facility). Sheriff Cupp said, "What we need is a 10-year plan for corrections in Hamilton County." He said he still favors the idea of building a second jail here, while keeping the Walnut Street facility in operation. The county recently opened a new wing at the workhouse that houses 128 males. But it quickly filled up. At the same time the old women's unit was torn down, and it had been housing 50 men in recent months. Sheriff Cupp said the lowered state payment under decertification would come on top of the fact that the state already is paying below the rate it actually costs to house and feed a prisoner. He told the commission, "Over the last 45 months, we have subsidized the state by over \$2 million." He said when he came into office the state was paying some \$60 per day. He said that recently was dropped from \$35 per day to \$30.84. The commission earlier approved 48 new jail workers and recently provided funds to add space for 22 inmates and more showers on the second floor of the jail. Commissioner William Cotton said part of the solution may be releasing more prisoners on lower bonds or on their own recognizance. He said the county may need to add a magistrate to handle the jail bonds. Commissioner Harold Coker said another addition may be necessary at Silverdale, which is operated by the private Corrections Corporation of America firm. Chairman Curtis Adams said the commission's corrections committee needs to study the entire corrections issue. He said, "Maybe we will be raising taxes for jails instead of education." He added, "The whole thing may need to be looked at. It's an alligator -- a great big alligator."