

County expects funds to ease jail crowding

By Chris Joyner Staff Writer

Hamilton County Executive Claude Ramsey said Thursday he expects to hear from federal officials today on funding of a new 128-bed prison to ease crowding at the county jail.

"I think we're going to get some help," he said.

Mr. Ramsey and Hamilton County Sheriff John Cupp met this week with officials from the United State Marshals Service to discuss details of the county's application for federal money. County officials have been planning the new jail for nearly a year.

If the county and federal government reach an agreement, the facility would be built at the Silverdale Workhouse.

Mr. Ramsey said construction of the facility would cost between \$4.5 million and \$5 million and would be funded through the Marshals Service's Cooperative Agreement Program. The program provides local governments with money for new prison space in exchange for an agreement to house federal prisoners awaiting trial and detainees of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Officials with the Marshals Service in Washington would not elaborate on details.

"We're in the discussion phase right now, but we're not in the contract stage," said Drew Wade, spokesman for the Marshals Service.

Mr. Ramsey said overcrowding is a serious problem at the county jail and the federal grant is an important part of the solution.

"We're full or pretty close," he said.

According to a count taken this week, the county jail has 619 prisoners, 129 of whom are facing federal charges or immigration violations. The jail has a capacity of 489, but Corrections Chief Jim Hart said the jail has been over capacity for years. Last year, the average daily population of the county jail was 581, according to the Sheriff's Office.

The federal government pays the county a per diem fee for housing federal prisoners while they await trial. Mr. Ramsey said the CAP grant would be in addition to any fees already received by the county.

Mr. Hart said the average stay for a county inmate awaiting trial is about four to six weeks. But federal prisoners, many of whom face federal drug charges, stay in the county lockup much longer.

"These guys can stay here two or three years waiting to go to trial," he said. "They are the heavy hitters."

Mr. Ramsey said the new facility would be used for prisoners facing county charges, as well as federal prisoners. Sheriff Cupp estimated construction of the facility likely would take about two years.

Hamilton County Commission Chairman Bill Hullander said relief cannot come too soon for the county jail.

"We've got a lot of prisoners in the county jail that we'll be able to transfer out (to the new facility). That will open up space in the county jail," he said. "It's really full right now."

Mr. Hart said last month there were some days when he had as many as 700 inmates crowded into the jail. To make room, jail officials have converted a prisoner library and recreation room into barracks-style rooms using bunk beds and temporary cots to make room for the overflow.

Sheriff Cupp has asked for additional money in next year's budget to hire 10 new guards for the jail to better manage the overpopulation problems.

"He has definitely got some needs over there," said Mr. Hullander, who toured the jail in March. "We'll have to look at that at budget time."

E-mail Chris Joyner at cjoyner@timesfreepress.com.