

County eyes jail relief at Silverdale
Detention facility may get more than the planned 128 additional beds.
By Matt Wilson and Brian Lazenby Staff Writers

EDITOR'S NOTE: For audio with this story, go to www.timesfreepress.com.

Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey said Wednesday a planned 128-bed expansion of Silverdale Detention Center may not be enough.

"We're doing 128 beds, and I've begun discussions about additional space," Mr. Ramsey said.

His comments came a day after the Hamilton County Jail reached a near-record inmate population. The jail, which has 490 beds, housed 745 inmates Tuesday, according to jail officials.

Chief Jim Hart, Hamilton County Jail administrator, said the inmate population at 7:15 a.m. Wednesday was 677. At 1:30 p.m., there were 652 inmates in the jail, he said.

"We're down quite a bit from yesterday," he said.

Mr. Ramsey said jail officials sent 53 inmates to the Silverdale facility Tuesday and planned to send another 15 Wednesday.

Chief Hart said jail officials already were scheduled to move 20 inmates this week. "But after conversations with the sheriff and Mayor Ramsey we sent 50, which is great news," he said.

Commissioner Fred Skillern said several commissioners think the detention facility should be expanded. He said the expansion should be at least double the planned 128-bed expansion.

The jail lost its certification in December 2006 because of overcrowding, but it was recertified in January after the county approved the Silverdale expansion. The jail must be inspected again no later than Sept. 26, according to an official at the Tennessee Corrections Institute.

In addition to 50 pretrial inmates, jail officials also transferred 10 locally sentenced inmates to Silverdale, Chief Hart said.

Bob Meeks, the county's chief magistrate, said the magistrates who set bonds on nights and weekends must follow the state Bail Bond Reform Act.

"Our goal is to protect the community and make sure defendants come back to court," he said. "We release those defendants that we can under the act."

General Sessions Judge Bob Moon said jail crowding is not a factor that can be taken into consideration under the act.

"Eighty percent of all crime in Hamilton County is drug related," he said. "Under such irresponsible culture and broadbased addiction, widespread crime and jail overcrowding are inevitable."

Mr. Ramsey said he was unsure of how much additional space would be needed at Silverdale.

He told the Hamilton County Commission that "we're dealing with it as fast as we can."

"No matter what we build, we fill it up," Mr. Ramsey said at the commission's Wednesday meeting.

Commissioner Warren Mackey asked Mr. Ramsey how much spending on building more jail cells is too much.

"It behooves us to figure out a better way," Dr. Mackey said, suggesting the county put more money into schools.

Mr. Ramsey said he agreed. "There's a reluctance on my part regarding how much money we spend on building jails," he said. "I'd much rather it go to schools." During calendar year 2006, records show the jail processed 23,393 inmates. From Jan. 1 through Aug. 31, almost 15,500 inmates have been processed into the facility.

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Jim Hart

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WHAT'S NEXT
Hamilton County officials are looking into expanding the Silverdale Detention Center beyond the planned 128-bed expansion. Officials will have to determine how many beds to add to the facility.





Claude Ramsey



Bob Meeks