

County looks to expand Silverdale jail by 128 beds

By Ian Berry Staff Writer

EDITOR'S NOTE: To hear recordings of Hamilton County Commission meetings, go to www.timesfreepress.com. Expansion of the Silverdale Workhouse by 128 beds should pave the way for recertification of the Hamilton County Jail, County Mayor Claude Ramsey said Thursday.

The county jail was 69 people over its certified capacity of 489 Thursday morning, but it often has run over by more than 100 inmates, records show.

"Under today's circumstances, it would bring us into compliance," Mr. Ramsey said. "How long we stay in compliance depends on how many people are incarcerated."

But Mr. Ramsey also said that simply deciding on the expansion should make the Tennessee Corrections Institute, which decertified the jail because of overcrowding in December 2005, look more favorably on the county's efforts, even before the 64 new cells open in about a year.

Mr. Ramsey made the announcement Thursday at the County Commission meeting. The decision, which will require commission approval, was made after months of suggestions ranging from converting parking garages to creating a "tent city" for inmates.

"I think it's the most eco- nomical and practical thing to do," Mr. Ramsey said.

He said he's been working to try to get a cost estimate on the project for a couple of weeks, and that he expects a final estimate in the next few days. Officials previously cited skyrocketing construction costs as one problem with such an expansion.

Some county commissioners had discussed turning the basement parking garage of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Courts Building into jail space. Other ideas have included expansion of the downtown jail or turning Sheriff Billy Long's offices into jail space.

But Mr. Ramsey said it would have created different problems by displacing other employees. "Any changes made over there had other consequences," he said.

The facility is operated by Corrections Corporation of America and has had similar 128-bed expansions three times since 1997.

"The county used a lot of foresight when preparing this," Silverdale Warden Dan Hobbs said. "It's definitely going to be a cost savings when they make the conversion."

The shell for the expansion — 16,000 square feet, with three walls already constructed — was built during the last expansion. The site has plumbing and electricity, officials said. It is being used for recreation and includes a basketball court.

Commissioner Greg Beck, chairman of the Security and Corrections Committee, applauded the recommendation. He noted after a visit to the Silverdale facility late last year that the site seemed readymade for expansion.

"I knew this situation was under consideration," Mr. Beck said. "That is why we didn't bite on any suggestion about alternative jail space."

But with a county jail population that generally has been more than 100 inmates above daily capacity, Commissioner Warren Mackey asked if the jail would be brought into compliance and for how long.

Dr. Mackey said he would prefer to spend public funds on higher education and other measures that prevent people from ending up in jail in the first place.

"It is so much more costeffective to direct costs in that direction rather than to remediation," Dr. Mackey said.

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Claude Ramsey

BY THE NUMBERS

- 489** Capacity of Hamilton County Jail
- 558** Jail population as of Thursday
- 784** Silverdale Workhouse capacity
- 128** Number of added beds planned
- 3** Number of 128-bed expansions at Silverdale since 1997

Source: Hamilton County, Corrections Corporation of America





Staff Photo by Tim Barber Dan Hobbs, warden at Silverdale Workhouse, stands inside the tower overlooking isolation cells. County commissioners are deciding whether to complete an identical wing that would house 128 more inmates.