

## **Final plan in works on jail's crowding**

**The county lockup hasn't been below inmate capacity since July 1997.**

**By Dick Cook Staff Writer**

Hamilton County Commissioner Larry Henry said he is pleased with the progress a consulting firm is making in studying overcrowding at the county jail.

"I was reluctant to spend \$109,000 on a consultant," said Mr. Henry, chairman of the commission's Security and Corrections Committee. "But I'm beginning to believe more now that we needed someone to look from the outside in and see things we may have missed in the judicial system." Employees of South Carolina-based Carter Goble Lee Associates have 120 days to develop a plan to deal with overcrowding in the Hamilton County Jail and the Silverdale Workhouse, county officials said. The firm has specialized in planning for correctional facilities since 1974, company officials said.

Carter Goble Lee personnel interviewed criminal justice officials here over a threeday period in the first week of April, officials said.

Mr. Henry said the firm's representatives discussed issues with Chief Magistrate Bob Meeks that include: Increasing the practice of officers issuing citations in lieu of arrest.

Starting a "day jail" in which those charged with minor crimes can attend GED classes or alcohol and drug abuse counseling at a site other than the jail.

Using electronic monitoring of prisoners before they are tried and after they are sentenced.

Mr. Henry said he thought the measures could help relieve jail overcrowding.

"I talked this fall about this very thing (electronic monitoring of inmates)," he said. "There is some community reluctance that would have to be overcome, (but) it would be an excellent way to free up some space." The Hamilton County Jail was built in 1974 and designed to hold 489 prisoners, records show. The facility consistently has housed more than 150 prisoners over its rated capacity for many years, officials said.

The jail last was below capacity in July 1997, but it has retained its state certification every year since, officials said. On Thursday, the jail's census was 659, officials said. Jim Hart, chief of corrections for the Hamilton County Jail, said Carter Goble Lee personnel interviewed officials from the jail, sessions and criminal courts, the U.S. marshal's office, city and juvenile courts and the community corrections program.

Mr. Hart said the firm's representatives were focused on "finding out who they need to be talking to in the system and gathering data." He said they "wanted to see what we have so they can start answering some questions."

Sheriff John Cupp said the study conceivably could stretch into July.

"We are nowhere near any conclusion," he said. "They will come back a number of times to interview people and gather information on different aspects of the operation."

Sheriff Cupp said the consultants interviewed people and left with "reams" of information but made no suggestions about jail operations.

Steve Carter, founder of Carter Goble Lee, said the firm now is studying the data and interviews gathered.

"The information gives us a statistical background and the interviews (provide) anecdotal information to assess how the system is currently operating," he said.

"Our efforts now are to learn. We are doing more listening than talking."

E-mail Dick Cook at [dcook@timesfreepress.com](mailto:dcook@timesfreepress.com)



Larry Henry



Sheriff John Cupp