

## **Hamilton County retains jail certification for now**

**By Andy Sher Nashville Bureau**

EDITOR'S NOTE: For audio with this story, go to [www.timesfreepress.com](http://www.timesfreepress.com).

NASHVILLE — A state panel decided Wednesday not to decertify Hamilton County's jail after county officials outlined a plan that could include a 200-bed expansion at the Silverdale Detention Center.

The expansion would come on top of a planned 128-bed increase at Silverdale, Hamilton County corrections director Barbara Payne told the Tennessee Corrections Institute's Board of Control.

"Those negotiations are ongoing," Ms. Payne said. "We're hoping to have as many as 150 to 200 additional beds beyond the 128. As late as last week, the county mayor (Claude Ramsey) spoke with CCA's (Chief Executive Officer John Ferguson) about the plans."

Both actions are intended to relieve pressure on the 490-bed jail in downtown Chattanooga. The county previously had reserved \$4 million for the 128-bed expansion at the 920-bed Silverdale center, run by Corrections Corporation of America.

Ms. Payne provided no cost estimates or time frame for the proposed additional beds.

The comments came as Ms. Payne, Hamilton County Sheriff Billy Long and other officials outlined a "plan of action" the county has developed to address prisoner overcrowding at the jail.

County officials said they are considering building a centralized booking area outside the jail to free up more jail space for prisoners. They pointed out the county is adding a new magistrate to set bonds and reshuffling the schedules of existing magistrates to better match peak prisoner booking periods.

The local officials' appearance at the Nashville meeting was spurred by a state jail inspection last week that found overcrowding remains a problem. The finding came about nine months after state officials recertified the facility in January upon the county's approval of the 128-bed expansion.

Delays on the expansion had prompted concern from state officials. Last week's inspection also took the county jail to task over 1970s-era lighting on the jail's fourth, fifth and sixth floors that does not meet modern standards.

But the Tennessee Corrections Institute's assistant director, Peggy Sawyer, told the board that despite problems, the Hamilton County Jail is "probably as good a run jail as any" in the state.

Jail Chief Jim Hart told the panel that the jail has made strides since September when 745 inmates were in the facility. In the latest census this week, there were 618 inmates, he said, calling that "probably the lowest number we've had in the last six months."

He also said Mr. Ramsey has committed funding to install 131 high-security lights.

The county's plan calls for putting out bids on the 128-bed project later this month and having the beds ready for prisoner use by July or August 2008.

Jerry Abston, the Tennessee Corrections Institute's executive director, recommended the board maintain the Hamilton County Jail's certification until 2008. The board agreed and accepted the county's plan-ofaction report.

Decertification would result in lower payments by the state for housing state prisoners and leave the county more vulnerable to litigation.

State Correction Department Commissioner George Little, a member of the Tennessee Corrections Institute's Board of Control, said he was "pleased to see the comprehensive approach that Hamilton County is taking."

Sheriff Long later said local officials "appreciate the board and their consideration. ...There's a lot of good things going on."

Mr. Abston said later that officials are "going to have to keep us updated on what they're doing." He said the state could decertify the downtown jail if adequate actions are not taken by the time of the next inspection in 2008.

He said that, while he thinks the county's plan "is real good, in my opinion it's not going to be a long-term solution for Hamilton County. It's going to be short term."

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**BY THE NUMBERS**

- Hamilton County Jail
- 490 — Beds at downtown jail
- 920 — Beds at Silverdale Detention Center
- 128 — Beds to be added in planned expansion at Silverdale
- 200 — Additional beds possibly coming at Silverdale