

Jail bursting at seams

Ramsey offers bond change, expansion as solutions

By Ginny LaRoe Staff Writer

County Mayor Claude Ramsey said Hamilton County should adopt an alternative bond program that would allow certain suspects who can't afford bail to get out of jail while awaiting trial.

He also proposed during Thursday's County Commission meeting to add beds at the Silverdale Workhouse to help alleviate overcrowding there and at the county jail.

"This is a reasonable alternative to a problem we have," Mr. Ramsey said.

The proposal included a plan to expand Silverdale by 228 beds for male detainees and 158 for females. Mr. Ramsey said the expansion and other improvements would cost an estimated \$7.8 million.

The alternative bond program was recommended by a consulting firm in 2003. It would require hiring four full-time staffers and would cost about \$216,000 a year to implement based on 17 inmates being processed a day, figures show.

Mr. Ramsey said it would save the county thousands of dollars a year.

The program would require Criminal Court and General Sessions Court judges to interview eligible defendants and assess their character, background and financial situation, Mr. Ramsey said. Judges then could release them without making them pay the bond set by a magistrate when they were arrested.

"All judges agreed to participate," Mr. Ramsey said.

General Sessions Court Judge Bob Moon said the program will mean more work for judges, but the program still should be tried. "It will beef up and create an additional bond docket for all the judges," he said.

Commissioners could vote on whether to move forward with the alternative bonding program by next week, Mr. Ramsey said. He said many pre-trial defendants who are detained for misdemeanors and other nonviolent offenses at the county jail and Silverdale cannot afford to make small-dollar bonds.

"In some instances they have served their time in jail before their trial," Mr. Ramsey said. Sheriff John Cupp said the vast majority of the inmates at the county jail are waiting for trial.

"Because we're over capacity, Silverdale has taken some pretrials," he said.

Sheriff Cupp said the county jail is certified by the state to house 490 inmates, but on average it houses 600.

"We are not violating any conditions of confinement," he said. "But could they decertify us for overcrowding? Possibly."

Commissioner William Cotton said he didn't think the proposal to waive bond for pre-trial inmates and add beds at Silverdale gets to the heart of the criminal justice system's problems.

"If you want to lower crime rates, we got to find jobs," he said.

Mr. Cotton also said he supports more emphasis on drug rehabilitation programs since many offenders have substance abuse problems.

Commission Chairman Larry Henry said there always are reservations when "people are being turned out."

But, he added, "This is the most viable program to keep from having to build more jails." Mr. Ramsey said only nonviolent defendants — such as those accused of misdemeanors — would be eligible to be released without paying bond. Chattanooga Police Chief Steve Parks said he didn't know the specifics of the proposal, but he is "in favor of that if there are standards where someone can objectively look at a person and say, 'This person meets our standards.'"

Commissioners said the Silverdale expansion is a long-term plan, and first they will consider the bonding program.

After the meeting, Mr. Ramsey said it is most likely that only about 128 beds for males would be added to the facility in the near future.

Mr. Henry said that project most likely would be paid for with a bond issue or through the county's general services fund without raising taxes.

Staff writer Brian Lazenby contributed to this story.

E-mail Ginny LaRoe at glaroe@timesfreepress.com **BY THE NUMBERS 1,478:** prisoners locked up at Silverdale and Hamilton County Jail Thursday night **490:** inmates the Hamilton County Jail is certified to hold **600:** inmates held in jail on average day **143:** pre-trial defendants in jail and Silverdale who would qualify for program **\$50:** cost per day to hold an inmate **\$216,324:** estimated annual budget to implement the proposed alternative bond program **\$219,160:** Corrections Corporation of America spends to house 17 prisoners for 365 days Source: County Mayor Claude Ramsey, Sheriff John Cupp



Staff Photo by Angela Lewis County Mayor Claude Ramsey speaks about jail overcrowding.





Staff Photo by Kathleen Greeson Many inmates at the Hamilton County Jail are housed in a former recreation area because of overcrowding.

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