

No relief in sight for county's crowded jail

By Ian Berry Staff Writer

Hamilton County leaders say there are no plans for a new county jail despite recent reports calling for a new facility.

"I don't see anything that's on the horizon for a new jail anytime soon," said Larry Henry, chairman of the County Commission.

A grand jury report last month recommended "long-range plans be made to expand the current jail or a similar facility as the population of the Chattanooga Metropolitan Area increases." The report also urged the County Commission to approve a bond issue to pay for the project as soon as possible.

The Tennessee Corrections Institute in an August inspection report also noted jail overcrowding and stated the county "should take a serious look at eliminating this problem by adding on to this jail or doing new construction." Instead, several county officials said they first want to see if Sheriff Billy Long can solve overcrowding problems at the 31-year-old jail and get the facility recertified by the state. The sheriff, who was sworn in Sept. 1, said during his election campaign that getting the jail recertified is one of his top priorities. Sheriff Long said the county is losing about \$50,000 per month in state and federal grants because of decertification, although he said that was just a ballpark estimate and the figure fluctuates from month to month.

"The jail is in bad shape," he said last week at an East Ridge Chamber of Commerce meeting. The Tennessee Corrections Institute decertified the jail in December because of overcrowding. In addition to lost state and federal money, decertification leaves the county vulnerable to lawsuits, officials said.

Sheriff Long and other officials said the more immediate task is to try to recertify the jail through alternative bond and sentencing guidelines. Efforts such as the alternative bond program, which allows some people charged with nonviolent crimes to be released on their own recognizance, should be given a chance to work, they said.

Sessions Court Judge Bob Moon said funding will determine whether more jail space is built. "There's an absolute need for additional space," Judge Moon said.

County officials including County Mayor Claude Ramsey and Commissioner Warren Mackey have said any new facility would be filled quickly.

Elsewhere in the region, new jails have opened in Sequatchie, Bradley and Marion counties during the past five years. Bledsoe County's jail, on the other hand, is 156 years old. Polk County commissioners have voted to build a new jail, but they have not found funding for construction.

Dr. Mackey said the better long-term solution to prison overcrowding is to focus on education because a disproportionate number of people who end up in jail are poorly educated. "I would prefer putting that money into the schools rather than the jails," Dr. Mackey said. "Let's make building jails the lowest priority."

Commissioner Fred Skillern said the county ultimately may want to build an addition to the jail or the Silverdale Workhouse, a facility managed by Corrections Corporation of America. Silverdale mostly houses long-term inmates but recently has begun housing pretrial inmates who would normally go to the county jail.

One way or another, Mr. Skillern said, the county will need more room to house inmates. E-mail Ian Berry at iberry@timesfreepress.com **BY THE NUMBERS** The Tennessee Corrections Institute conducted its annual inspection of the Hamilton County Jail last month and noted the booking area holding tank was "very crowded." The inspector did not recommend recertification. 489: Jail capacity 574: Population on inspection day 560: Six-month average population Source: Tennessee Corrections Institute



Larry Henry



Billy Long