

Silverdale expansion gauged at \$5 million

By Ian Berry Staff Writer

EDITOR'S NOTE: To hear Hamilton County Jail Chief Jim Hart talk about prison overcrowding, go to www.timesfreepress.com.

The cost of creating more jail space and winning recertification for the Hamilton County Jail will be roughly \$5 million, according to county commissioners.

Curtis Adams, chairman of the commission's Finance Committee, said the 128-bed expansion at the Silverdale Detention Facility will be paid for through a bond issue. Commission Chairman Larry Henry said it could be covered by the \$125 million bond issue the county approved last year primarily for school construction.

But County Mayor Claude Ramsey, who announced the decision to expand on Jan. 11 and said a final cost estimate would be ready in a few days, would not give a rough estimate Friday for the cost of the project.

"We have not yet pinned it down," Mr. Ramsey said.

The expansion at Silverdale would be the county's fourth since 1997. It would alleviate overcrowding at the jail downtown, which is designed to hold 489 inmates but has averaged 588 a day so far this year, according to Jail Chief Jim Hart.

The Tennessee Corrections Institute, which had decertified the jail in late 2005 because of overcrowding, recertified it in January because the county announced it had a plan to relieve the overcrowding by expanding at Silverdale.

Chief Hart said overcrowding places stress on the jail system in a variety of ways, from inmates' temperament to the doors, toilets and sinks that make up the facility.

"It just sort of cramps on that elbow room, if you will, to sort of relax and go sit off in the corner somewhere in your cell," Chief Hart said.

Mr. Henry said the expansion will buy the county more time, but that jail space has been an issue since he joined the commission in 2002. He said he expects the county will have to look at more jail construction in five or six years.

"We're certainly going to have to look at that, further down the line," Mr. Henry said.

Silverdale, run by Nashville-based Corrections Corporation of America, has had three similar 128-bed expansions since 1997. County officials said expanding the facility on Standifer Gap Road is the most economical way to create jail space because there is already a "shell" in place where the new cells can go.

Christina Young, a spokeswoman for CCA, said her company has not been involved in planning meetings with the county, and she referred questions about the potential cost to Mr. Ramsey's office.

"This has truly been a county project," Ms. Young said.

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Jim Hart