

Three firms interested in building new jail

BY JUDY WALTON

STAFF WRITER

Three private prison operators say they're interested in building and running a new Hamilton County Jail.

Corrections Corporation of America, GEO Group and Emerald Companies submitted qualifications by last week's deadline, said Gail Roppo, director of purchasing for Hamilton County government.

CCA has operated the Silverdale facility under contract since 1984 but its contract expires in September. Roppo said the county hopes to have a new contract signed by then if one or more of the bidders meets requirements.

The county wants a private company to build and operate a 1,600-bed jail at Silverdale.

"That's our ultimate end goal, but any prospect will have a lot of work to do to get there," she said Friday.

CCA's 1984 contract was the company's first; now it is one of the largest for-profit prison operators in the U.S., with about 86,000 beds and 13,000 employees in more than 70 facilities, according to its website.

GEO Group Inc. also submitted qualifications. The Boca Raton, Fla., company has 87,000 beds and 20,500 employees in 104 facilities, its website states.

The third firm is Emerald Companies, of LaFayette, La. It's much smaller, operating fewer than 3,000 prison beds in six Western states. A sibling company offers institutional healthcare services, its website states.

Hamilton County leaders have talked for years about the need to replace the obsolete, inefficient and overcrowded downtown jail. The request for qualifications that went out to vendors calls for a new jail at Silverdale and a 150-bed processing center downtown.

The request states: "It is the County's intent to enter into a long-term contract for corrections services."

Though County Mayor Jim Coppinger has said no decision has been made, he's in favor of hiring out the construction and operation of a jail.

"From where I sit, we're excited about the prospect of what the future could hold, and also the fact we had people who are interested," Coppinger said Friday.

There's a complicated vetting process for any company that meets the qualifications, and an even more complicated negotiation thereafter.

"We'll read [the qualifications submissions] and decide if they're qualified from operations and financial standpoint," Roppo said. "Then we'll begin conversations with them. They'll probably have some opportunity for site visits and things like that so they can begin to get a sense of what the project is."

Sheriff Jim Hammond, whose office is responsible for the jail, will be heavily involved.

On Friday, he said via email this is just the "early planning stages" of a long process.

"My staff and I are working with the County Mayor to move forward. ... A lot of the particulars are merely speculation as of now," Hammond said.

Coppinger said stakeholders from all areas will be involved, but the sheriff's will be the key voice.

"At the end of the day, it will be the sheriff's decision whether we can go forward. The jails are his, we're just responsible for making sure there is a jail."

The county is paying a consultant, Public Financial Management Inc., \$210,000 to identify and negotiate with private prison operators interested in building and/or operating the Hamilton County Jail. PFM can earn a bonus up to \$250,000 if the county eventually signs a contract with a private operator.

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