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Camco officials move toward privatized jail

By GEORGE MAST • Courier-Post Staff • December 14, 2009

CAMDEN — To fix its problematic and oft maligned jail, Camden County officials said they will hire a private corrections firm to build and operate a new facility, the Courier-Post has learned.

In a meeting with leaders of the county's law enforcement community, officials said the move will address overcrowding, provide taxpayer savings; increase inmate treatment and training programs to reduce the chances of inmates returning to jail; and provide jobs and taxes for Camden.

Officials told the municipal police chiefs that privatization "makes the most sense in terms of public safety and cost." "We need to act to stop the bleeding," Freeholder Director Louis Cappelli Jr. said in a prepared statement. "Privatization is the way to go. It can stop overcrowding almost immediately, by privatizing in place, and could save \$5 million to \$10 million a year in operating costs."

County officials said the county would help the more than 350 corrections officers through the transition by offering a severance package; education and retraining benefits; specifying the private firm give current officers first consideration for jobs; and mandate the new employer provide health and pension benefits.

County officials will meet this week with local and state elected officials to discuss their decision to privatize the county jail.

County officials have been studying ways to remedy escalating costs, long-time overcrowding and poor conditions at the aging facility on Federal Street in Camden for years.

The county facility is the subject of a federal lawsuit and under judge's order to fix problems affecting inmate safety. Union officials at the jail have vehemently opposed privatization, citing safety concerns and studies showing lower than expected savings. Union officials also question the legality of such a move. Union officials have said they don't believe a new facility is necessary and have supported renovations or additions to the current jail.

The county's decision to privatize comes two months after a consultant's report, commissioned by the county to explore options for replacing the current jail, recommended privatization as the best choice. The report also addressed the option of a new county run facility and creating a regional authority to build, operate, and own a new jail. Since 2004, five studies have been done on jail operations or facility needs, according to the county report on Wednesday. This year the county also hired a consulting expert to examine ways to reduce overcrowding by streamlining the criminal justice system as a whole.

As part of their research, county officials have had conversations with private corrections companies and toured privately managed facilities. County officials visited Community Education Centers Inc.'s facilities in Delaware County, Pennsylvania and the company's drug and treatment center outside Philadelphia. Last week officials were in Citrus County, Florida to visit a detention facility operated by Corrections Corporation of America.

Cappelli said public safety of residents, corrections officers and jail inmates as well as the protection of the "interests of our taxpayers" as critical components in the county's decision to privatize.

"Having painstakingly explored all the options, over the course of several years and many studies and consultant's reports, we have decided that privatization is absolutely the best option to achieve those three goals," Cappelli said in his statement.

The county's presentation to police chiefs on Wednesday on its solution for remedying the overcrowding, poor design and escalating costs of the current jail, stated renovating the current facility would cost in excess of \$50 million and wouldn't solve the design issues. In addition, there isn't adequate space for renovations at the current site, county officials said.

The option of leasing beds from a public or private operator would add \$20 to \$25 million in annual operating costs, officials said.

County officials said a new county-built facility would cost between \$250 million to \$400 million. The combined debt service and operating expenses would cost \$90 million annually, or nearly one-third of the county budget. County officials have not said how much they expect a privately built facility would cost. They said construction by a private firm would be quicker and at a lower cost.

In considering a regionalized jail, officials found interest but no commitment from outside parties and disagreements over location and time considerations, officials said.

Cappelli said the county will continue to meet with community, business and law enforcement leaders to explain the privatization decision and its impacts.

"It is our intention to pursue this course with all due diligence and care," he stated.