

COURIER-POST

County adds backer on jail privatization

By GEORGE MAST • Courier-Post Staff • December 24, 2009

CAMDEN — Camden County officials announced Wednesday that U.S. Rep. Robert Andrews is in support of the county's plan for privatizing its jail.

The announcement from Andrews, a Haddon Heights Democrat, came a day after the Courier-Post reported the mayors of Gloucester Township and Cherry Hill were backing the county's plan to hire a private firm to build and manage a new jail.

In a prepared statement released by the county, Andrews said he believes privatization will both increase safety and save taxpayers money. Andrews was not available for comment on Wednesday but the congressman's spokesman confirmed statements attributed to him in the release.

"The cost savings will be enormous, which should be the highest priority of elected officials in these very difficult economic times," Andrews said in the release. "I also believe that putting the detention center in the hands of a first-rate private- management team will mean a more streamlined, efficient operation at the facility."

Earlier this month county officials tried rallying support for their plan through a series of meeting with county mayors and elected state officials. Union officials at the jail have said they plan to hold their own informational sessions for municipal leaders in an effort to debunk the county's predicted \$5 million to \$10 million in operational savings through privatization.

Camden Mayor-Elect Dana Redd said Tuesday she was still investigating the merits of privatization. Mayors from Collingswood, Woodlynne and Haddon Township have expressed concern over the plan because of a possible jail location site near their municipality's borders in South Camden.

A release also issued by the county freeholder's office on Wednesday, said Pennsauken Mayor Bill Orth and Mayor-Elect Rick Taylor were in support of privatization. However, when contacted by the Courier-Post Tuesday night, Taylor said he hasn't endorsed the plan and wasn't familiar with his quotes in the release.

Orth could not be reached for comment.

County officials have said the current jail is unsustainable because of long-time crowding, escalating costs and some \$50 million needed in facility repairs. County officials also say a federal judge may soon order hundreds of inmates a day released if crowding isn't alleviated.

Union officials at the jail have vehemently opposed privatization, citing safety concerns and studies showing lower-than-expected savings.

They also question the legality of such a move and have said they don't believe a new facility is necessary.