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Private jail contract may come next year

By GEORGE MAST • Courier-Post Staff • December 15, 2009

CAMDEN — The possibility of releasing hundreds of inmates daily to meet a federal order to fix crowding in the Camden County jail was a key motivation for county officials to act now on a permanent solution.

County officials, in making the decision to privatize the jail, said ongoing litigation, public safety and escalating costs were the key factors.

"The federal court is either going to tell us to release around 700 prisoners or build a new facility," said Freeholder-Director Louis Cappelli Jr. "We are losing that case."

County Administrator Ross Angilella said he is expecting a judgment next year in the case filed in 2005.

Angilella said Monday he expects a contract to build and manage a new jail will be awarded to a private corrections firm by this time next year. At that time, operation of the current facility would be handed over to the firm as a new facility is built. The move would make Camden County the first county in the state to have a completely privatized correctional facility.

With the next month, county freeholders are expected to approve a contract for a consulting firm to write the specifications for the new jail and operations contract. County officials said that process should take about six months. The proposal will then be opened to corrections firms to bid on.

Angilella said it's expected that the actual construction phase would take about 18 months -- a process that he said would be quicker and less expensive than if the county built a new jail itself.

Oversight of the private firm throughout construction of a new facility and later the continuing operation of all corrections functions would be handled by Warden Eric Taylor, Cappelli and Angilella said.

As the planning process continues, Cappelli and Angilella said talks with unionized corrections workers will continue. County officials reiterated Monday that other alternatives, like remodeling the current facility along Federal Street in Camden, building a regionalized jail or constructing a county-built and -run facility, are too expensive, impractical or not sufficient.

Angilella, Cappelli, Taylor, Camden County Sherriff Charles Billingham and county spokeswoman Joyce Gabriel met with the Courier-Post Monday to provide more details about the county's decision to privatize jail operations.

County officials announced their decision to privatize in a meeting with local police officials last week. On Monday county officials met with municipal mayors in Camden County and are scheduled to meet with elected state officials
today.

Attorney Stuart Alterman, who represents the 332 member PBA Local 351, said union officials welcome talks with county leaders but are highly opposed to privatization.

"We're going to do what needs to be done to oppose privatization at the local, county and state levels," Alterman said. Alterman and corrections officers have pointed to horror stories of violence and escape from private facilities and studies calling into question the true savings of privatization as examples of its inferiority to publicly run correctional facilities.

"We think that the freeholders are wrong in their approach and that through years of neglect and mismanagement they have created this situation and now want to bail out on the backs of not only the officers but the tax payers," Alterman said.

PBA Local 351 President Robert Parker did return a call for comment on Monday.

In hopes of mitigating the expected opposition from the corrections officers, county officials are considering options to make the switch over easier. Chief among them is the possibility of officers continued participation in the state pension plan. That would take a change in state law to allow current corrections officers who are hired by the private firm to remain in their pension plan, Angilella said.

County officials also want current officers to be given a first chance for employment with the private company operating the jail. In addition to the county officials said they will offer a severance package and education and retraining benefits.

"That would go a long way toward addressing opposition," Angilella said.

The county is also interested in the possibility of having corrections officers retain their police powers if they are hired by the private firm, Angilella said. That too would require a change in state law.

While the county is pursuing a new, larger jail, Cappelli said work continues to examine the efficiency of the county's criminal justice system to reduce the population, which has averaged about 1,700 inmates over the last five years. Last summer the county hired a national expert on alternatives to incarceration to work with a group of stakeholders in the criminal justice system in an effort to find ways to make the pretrial process smoother and more efficient.
"We're still looking at ways to reduce the population," Cappelli said. "That won't go away and the more effective we are in reducing the population the greater the savings will be in the future."

And even though they have begun to have success in lowering the population, county officials said it's not enough. Currently, three or four inmates sleep in cells designed for two. Often an inmate sleeping on the floor lies near the toilet.

"It's really a situation that the federal judge finds appalling," said Cappelli, who has repeatedly described the current jail as "unsustainable." The design of the facility, opened as a multileveled jail in 1988, was poor from the start, Angilella said.

Within six months the jail, built for about 460 people, had two people sleeping in the cells originally designed for one. A past five-year population average around 1,700 has been far above the 1,083 inmate capacity.

Taylor said the constant overcrowding has caused the jail to rapidly age. Each day, three to four times as much food is prepared in the kitchen than for which it was designed. The same is true with the laundry service and plumbing. "That beats up all of the equipment that we have," Taylor said of the overcrowding.

Cappelli called the jail "embarrassing."

About $50 million in repairs are needed to fix up the current facility, but that only leaves the county with a rehabbed but poorly designed jail too small for its current population, Camden County Sheriff Charles Billingham said. County officials said again Monday that all factors are now pointing to privatization as the best bet.

"It has been made very clear to us through our investigation and research that a private facility is just as safe as a public facility and that a private facility can be operated at much lower cost than a public facility," Cappelli said.

The county estimates it will save between $5 million to $10 million a year in operational costs through privatization. A county built facility could cost between $250 million and $400 million and would double the county's debt service and have a large impact on taxes, Angilella said.

While corrections officers have criticized the security of private corrections firms, Taylor said its how the jail is run that makes it safe or insecure.

"You cannot make it work," Taylor said of the current facility. "I feel that a private firm who has the county instructing them on what they want done can do the job just as well as anyone else."