

# COURIER-POST

## Private jail wins endorsement of Platt and Mayer

By GEORGE MAST • Courier-Post Staff • December 23, 2009

**CAMDEN** — Mayors of two of Camden County's largest municipalities are lining up behind a private county jail, while others concerned over location of a new jail are still weighing the options.

Cherry Hill Mayor Bernie Platt and Gloucester Township Mayor-elect David Mayer cite expected cost savings in their backing of the county plan to hire a private corrections firm to build and manage a new jail. Neither, however, wants to see a new jail come to their municipality.

A possible South Camden site for a new jail, meanwhile, has mayors in neighboring Collingswood, Haddon Township and Woodlynne undecided on the county's plan.

Cherry Hill spokesman Dan Keashen said Platt's main reason for supporting the plan of privatization is the \$5 million to \$10 million in operating costs county officials say they expect to save taxpayers.

"The mayor knows that there is one concrete unbiased fact when it comes to the prison, and that is that the current correctional facility is broken," Keashen said. "Bernie is in full support of creating a viable alternative to the current structure and doing it in the most cost-effective way possible."

However, Keashen said the mayor would not in "any way, shape or form" support a new jail being built in Cherry Hill.

"He would actually fight against it," Keashen said.

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.

Mayer said he supports the county for thinking of ways to cut costs.

"We have to look for creative and innovative ways to provide services that cost less and I think this is one of those ways we can do that," Mayer said.

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. They have said they don't believe a new facility is necessary and have supported renovations or additions to the current jail.

Corrections officers attended two public meetings last week to protest the county's decision. At a meeting of the Haddon Township council, Police Benevolent Association Local 351 President Robert Parker told the township mayor

and commissioners the union would be adamantly opposing privatization. "We're professional police-trained officers," Parker said. "They are proposing to bring in substandard care. Hopefully, you won't have a jail in your backyard because there is nothing good that could come out of it."

For over an hour, corrections officers spoke largely of security concerns they say are inherent when for-profit companies take over the correctional duties of a public entity.

Those safety concerns, the speakers pointed out, could be coming to Haddon Township as a private corrections firm has put options on a parcel of land along Mount Ephraim Avenue in South Camden that sits near the border of Woodlynne, Collingswood and Haddon Township. Corrections officers spoke against the plan at the Camden City council meeting Tuesday night.

On Tuesday, Sgt. Peter Farlow, a corrections officer at the jail, said union leaders plan to have their own information sessions with mayors and police chiefs. Farlow said they plan to show that the county released costs associated with running the jail are exaggerated.

"Their numbers are all over the world," Farlow said. "This whole cost savings is really a smoke screen." In a series of meetings held earlier this month, Camden County officials presented to municipal leaders their plans to hire a private company to build and manage a new jail.

"We are pleased that key decision makers and municipal leaders from across the county have endorsed a jail reform plan that saves taxpayer dollars, while ensuring the safety of county residents," Freeholder Deputy Director Edward McDonnell said of Platt and Mayer's backing.

A private corrections firm has since placed options to buy a parcel of land along Mount Ephraim Avenue.

Collingswood Mayor Jim Maley said he recently met with county officials to discuss the plan. On Dec. 17, he sent a letter to county administrator Ross Angilella asking the county to include a provision in its request for qualifications or proposals that the new jail be at least 2,000 feet from residential neighborhoods.

"If they do that, the Mount Ephraim (Avenue) site won't work," Maley said.

Maley said his main concern is the location of the new county jail.

"Whatever the county thinks they should do, that's for them to decide," Maley said. "Do I want a corrections facility across our border? No. I'm only concerned about how it will impact us."

Haddon Township Mayor Randall Teague and Woodlynne Mayor Geraldo Fuentes echoed Maley's concerns.

"At this point, I don't think I've seen enough to make a decision, but our primary concern is the proximity to Haddon Township," Teague said.

Teague said he plans to attend an upcoming planning board meeting in Camden to learn more about the plan.

Fuentes said he would like to meet with county freeholders and visit all possible jail locations before deciding whether to support the plan.

"I think it's still a little premature for me to say anything on it because we don't have all the facts," Fuentes said.

Pennsauken Mayor-elect Rick Taylor said he hasn't taken a stance on the county's plan.

"I don't know enough about all the details to make a statement," he said. "Privatization is the right of the county. My concern is for Pennsauken.