

COURIER-POST

A private jail is the best solution

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Having a company build a jail offers the fastest and least costly answer to overcrowding.

Strapped taxpayers never want to hear about having to spend millions of dollars to improve jails.

But in Camden County, fixing the dangerously crowded county jail is not a choice for the elected freeholders. It is demanded by federal court orders. And there is a strong chance, because of a class action lawsuit, that a federal judge could order the jail to release hundreds of inmates daily as new ones come in because the conditions at the jail are so bad.

The hulking, seven-story facility built in the mid-1980s in downtown Camden was a colossal mistake, at least in its design. It was built to hold about 460 inmates -- one to a cell in tiny cells of less than 75 square feet. But since the year it opened, overcrowding issues have forced the jail to go beyond its design capacity. Its daily population these days stands at around 1,600 inmates -- three, even four, to a cell.

A just-released study from the independent Pulitzer/Bogard group hired to look at the situation and offer solutions, recommends contracting with a private company to take over managing the jail. The company would build a new jail, one that has the proper capacity and does not have the myriad flaws and safety hazards of the current jail. We endorse privatization because it appears to be, by far, the best solution. It can bring about the fastest results to satisfy the courts, keep the public safe and cost the least for county taxpayers.

After years of study, county officials are trying to act decisively and appropriately. They don't want to see a judge demand the release of roughly 700 inmates.

Renovating and adding onto the existing jail isn't a wise choice because it would cost too much and still leave the county with a bad facility where guards and inmates are always in danger because of poor sightlines and other design flaws. County officials acknowledge that the jail's designers in the 1980s did a lousy job.

The Pulitzer/Bogard study says if the county built a new facility itself, it would cost anywhere from \$250 million to \$400 million. The tax increase county residents would see would be "significant" according to Freeholder-Director Louis Cappelli Jr.

Letting a private company take over jail operations, on the other hand, offers a chance for the county to save taxpayers \$5 million to \$10 million a year in regular jail operating costs. Overcrowding would be addressed immediately because a private jail operator would have capacity in its other jails.

The union that represents corrections officers at the jail is already gearing up for a battle. The county would be laying off jail employees.

However, county officials also say that on top of severance and job-training programs for those laid off, they'll look to strike a deal with the private firm to give current employees hiring

preference for jobs at the new jail. And, County Administrator Ross Angilella says that for employees who move to the privately-run jail, a system could be devised to let them stay in the state pension plan.

On all fronts, this looks like the right move for the county to address jail crowding. We support this decision.