

Guest Column on the County Jail Expansion Process

By DeKalb County Board Vice Chairman Tracy Jones

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As Vice Chairman of the DeKalb County Board and as Chairman of the County's Jail Solutions Committee, I want to take this opportunity to clearly address the problems we face with our current county jail. I will explain some of the solutions that the DeKalb County Board voted to move forward with on July 1st, 2015.

The current jail opened in 1980. For longtime residents of the county, I am sure you can remember what the area looked like at that time. For myself, I was graduating Sycamore High School and I believe the population sign on the edge of town said 7,800. The County population is currently 40% higher than it was in 1980. The jail was built to house 64 inmates and since then has undergone one expansion where all the cells were simply double bunked, making the capacity 89 inmates. The DeKalb County jail population currently stands at around 121 inmates. Over the last year the jail population has varied, and has been as high as 160 inmates.

Factors such as changes in the laws which created new crimes, and additional penalties for criminals, have also contributed to the increased jail population. The inmates that we do not have room to house in our facility are transported to either the Boone or Kendall County jails. This comes at a cost of approximately \$ 1 million annually, not to mention the inefficient use of time, and the liability of transporting prisoners back and forth.

The need for a jail expansion is about more than just the population and money spent to house prisoners elsewhere though. There are state and federal standards mandating the treatment of inmates. This expansion will allow us to meet those standards. More importantly though, is the safety of our officers. Currently we have 3-5 officers monitoring our inmates at any one time.

We have many inmates that require their own space. There are male, female, violent, nonviolent, and mentally ill inmates that all require separate spaces. These are spaces which we cannot provide in the current jail.

The current facility lacks an adequate booking/holding area also. It may have been functional in 1980 for the 64 inmates the original jail was built for, but the entire population, including those housed out of county, are all booked at our facility. Those being booked may include people that are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, which need special accommodations for their safety that the current facility does not have. With the State cutting funding for mental health institutions, we have people with mental health issues or other medical issues that also require proper space, not just for their safety, but for our officers' safety. Our jail lacks other

core spaces including kitchen, property room, and staff and visiting area spaces. These are critical needs for our facility to function efficiently.

The County has made every attempt to address jail overcrowding. Four jail studies have been conducted over the past 25 years. Each study has made recommendations about diversion programs that could be implemented to reduce the jail population. Each time a recommendation was made, it was implemented. Some of the diversionary programs that the county has implemented are:

- Electronic Home Monitoring – EHM – (1997) better known as “the bracelet” with GPS, for both pre- and post-sentencing prisoners.
- Video Bond Call – (1997)
- Drug Court – (2006) diverting those with drug/alcohol convictions.
- Weekend Bond Calls – (2000) a judge hears bond cases on Saturday mornings to avoid housing inmates over a weekend.
- Increased number of staff, judges, public defenders, and states’ attorneys to facilitate quicker case resolution.
- In-house criminal justice managers are all made aware of the overcrowding situation and daily jail populations.
- Intensive Probation.
- New Pre-trial program – (2014) an assessment risk is completed for the inmate to see if a lower or no bond is a potential.

The County continues to seek methods by which the number of inmates can be reduced without jeopardizing public safety. Most recently we have begun to study the benefits of a Mental Health Court.

In September, 2010 the County Board saw the need for jail expansion and put the wheels into motion to construct an expansion to the existing jail. The plans that were carefully thought out and designed were never acted upon because the funding source for the project, the landfill expansion, was held up in court. Since that time, the court settled in favor of the County, and the added revenue from the landfill has begun to come into the County in the last few months. The question now was, with the four-year delay and inflated building costs, would we have enough money to complete the project? We also have the threat of losing \$2.5 million dollars in annual revenue from the sales tax collected on airline fuel sold in the county.

In December of 2014, when Chairman Mark Pietrowski and I were elected to leadership positions on the County Board, we made the jail project a priority. In early 2015, we formed a Jail Solutions Committee to study all aspects of this issue. As Chairman of this committee I can say that I am very proud of the work they have done! We had lengthy talks about what were acceptable ways to pay for the jail expansion and what funding options were off the table. We discussed the overall financial impact of what may or may not happen down the road. We

studied the plans that were already designed, and educated ourselves on why the plan was designed the way it was.

With the help of our County Administration, we have developed a plan to finance the jail expansion project without raising any property taxes, a goal of our committee and of the County Board. The plan sells bonds and then uses the minimum guaranteed amount collected from the landfill to pay them off. Because of the favorable bonding environment at this time, we anticipate as much as \$25 million being generated from that source. The second funding piece looks out into the future to the year 2029 when the Courthouse bonds (debt) will be paid off. The sales tax sharing agreement with the City of DeKalb on the old County Farm property will have five years left, and will bring in another \$ 1 million per year for 5 years. The final piece for the remaining amount needed for construction would come from internal borrowing and only be used if needed.

There are still many hurdles that need to be cleared before this is a done deal. The final cost and the exact amount we can generate from the landfill will not be known for a while. We hope to issue bonds in late 2015 and break ground in the spring of 2016. Construction should be complete in the summer of 2018. The jail expansion plan will provide capacity for about 140 inmates, and money to operate it as soon as it opens.

Jails are expensive to add on to, so this plan includes “shell space” for additional beds. Shell space is space that is enclosed and planned for, but not completely built out. When that space is built out, it would bring the capacity to more than 200 inmates. Additional operating money for this build out has not been identified at this point, and would only be needed if our jail population increased later. This plan meets our current needs and plans for the future, with the money we have available.

The information I have provided explains the need for this facility and everything the county has done to keep our jail population as low as it can be, in a safe manner. We are using the landfill expansion money for what people were told it was going to be used for, and we are not proposing to increase property taxes. The plan does have some risk to it and that is the possible loss of the \$2.5 million in airline fuel sales tax. That potential loss does not affect the plan directly, but would leave a big hole in our general fund budget. Even though we are not asking for any additional property tax money, Chairman Pietrowski and I plan to hold several informational meetings around the county to further answer any questions you may have. Thank you!