

Board considers juvenile hall grant request

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT ‐ A growing youth offender population and consistent overpopulation issues make a new juvenile hall a necessity, the county's outgoing chief probation told the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

Retiring Chief Probation Officer Steve Buchholz went before the board to ask them to consider giving the go ahead on an application with the Corrections Standards Authority for funding to construct a new juvenile correctional facility.

He said the new facility is expected to cost \$20 million, with the county expected to provide a \$5 million match.

Lake County's current juvenile hall opened in 1982, Buchholz said. In recent years, the 16-room facility has consistently maintained a population of 40 or more juveniles, with two to three sharing a room and four to five juveniles in lockdown at any one time.

The facility's linear design has resulted in a lack of space for rehabilitation and other programs, and is considered among the state's worst juvenile halls among south counties, he added.

Like all aging buildings, the juvenile hall also has more than its fair share of maintenance issues. Since January there have been 63 repair and maintenance requests submitted, Buchholz.

The main issue is room for juvenile inmates, said Buchholz. "We are in desperate need of additional bed space."

For the last two years, juvenile hall has regularly released children early because there isn't enough room to hold them. Being over capacity is a big issue with both the state and legal advocacy groups, said Buchholz. As a result, local law enforcement has been very selective as to which juveniles to book into the facility.

A needs assessment being conducted on juvenile hall said it cannot be fixed but must be replaced, Buchholz said.

Buchholz asked the board to apply for the grant, which he said was "incredibly important" for many reasons.

For one, said Buchholz, "There's more kids out there that need to be detained than we can accommodate."

Further, another grant offering likely won't be available for several years, and this particular grant ‐ which focuses on programming and rehabilitation ‐ is particularly well suited to Lake County, he said.

Buchholz said he's looked at buying bed space in other counties, but those bed spaces are hard to come by, and when beds can be found they tend to be expensive. Sacramento County, for example, charges \$202 per day per juvenile.

To apply for the grant, Buchholz said the county need a "hard match" of 25 percent, or \$5 million. However, the consultant doing the needs assessment thinks the county may be able to get a match as low as \$3 million.

The grant will take time to put together, said Buchholz, with a 52-page request for proposal to fill out.

Planning on a 20-year horizon, Buchholz estimated the county will need 90 beds, but the state will only allow them to plan through 2013.

If the county applies for the grant, the county will need to pay out about \$1 million per year over the next three fiscal years.

County Administrative Officer Kelly Cox said it was difficult to make a decision on the grant without seeing the final needs assessment. Cox said the original facility had an expansion option, which was never used and was still possible.

He said he was concerned about staffing the new facility; when the county built the jail it ended up costing more to staff it than to build it.

The juvenile hall grant originally had the possibility of a \$9 million match, so the cost is going down, said Cox. However, he suggested Buchholz bring back the assessment so the board can make a decision.

Buchholz responded to Cox, reiterating that the state said the county can't add on to the facility.

Cox had mentioned that a grant writer hadn't been scheduled into this year's budget; Buchholz said the probation budget can cover the grant writer, though it will be tight.

Supervisor Denise Rushing said she also wanted to see the needs assessment report.

"We do need to do something," added Supervisor Rob Brown, although he was worried about the costs of consultants to get through the process.

Supervisor Jeff Smith said this was the first opportunity in years that the county had to receive grant funding for a new Juvenile Hall. "I wish we didn't have to have it at all, but that's not reality."

Board Chair Ed Robey suggested the issue return to the board on Oct. 7, when the needs assessment will be available. Buchholz said the new chief probation officer will bring it to the board at that time.

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