

NO VACANCY

THE NEED FOR A NORTH COUNTY JAIL

The 2004-2005 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury again recognizes the critical need for a jail facility in the northern part of Santa Barbara County.

The Santa Barbara County Main Jail is located off Calle Real between Turnpike and El Sueño Roads in Santa Barbara. The Jail is operated by the County Sheriff. The State Board of Corrections (BOC) rated capacity for this facility is 618 beds—543 beds for men and 75 for women.

At the time of the Grand Jury's annual inspection, the Jail was filled to capacity with an additional 68 inmates sleeping on mattresses on the floor in cell areas. The BOC, in its most recent annual assessment of the Jail, cited the Santa Barbara County Sheriff for this overcrowding violation of the Jail's rated capacity. Overcrowding can add significantly to the antisocial behavior of inmates and inhibit the ability of Corrections staff to effectively supervise a volatile and dangerous population.

The Average Daily Population (ADP) of the Main Jail in 2004 was 717—16% over the rated capacity as determined by BOC. In 2003, the ADP was 10.5% over the rated capacity. The Sheriff estimates that by the year 2020, 1,575 beds will be needed. This is a 154% increase over present capacity in only 15 years.

In the early 1980s, a lawsuit was brought against Santa Barbara County because of jail overcrowding. The resulting court order judged the overcrowding condition illegal. In interviews and briefings with the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury, the Board of Supervisors, and the media, the County Sheriff has stated that the Main Jail overcrowding is continuously out of compliance with the court order.

The court order also required that action be taken to eliminate the situation. A committee of representatives from the Courts, Public Defender, County Counsel, District Attorney, Mental Health, Probation, Sheriff's Department and local police agencies was asked to find solutions to alleviate this overcrowding. As a result, the committee created the criteria for an early release program that have been used for the past two decades to ease the problem and attempt to comply with the court order.

This early release program is only for persons incarcerated for misdemeanors. It has been a useful tool to temporarily alleviate overcrowded conditions. The program is no longer working because overcrowding has become a sustained rather than a temporary condition. With an increase in felony arrests, the percentage of misdemeanants has dropped to about 29% of the total jail population. Since only misdemeanants are eligible for early release, the program has become less effective.

In 2004, a total of 1,898 inmates (1,598 male, 300 female) were granted early release due to jail overcrowding. It should be noted that there are several negative impacts of the early release program. For example, public safety is threatened and justice is compromised when criminals do not serve the full term for their illegal acts. Also, it is not a fair and equitable practice of law enforcement. The 1999-2000 Grand Jury stated that the early release program "is a poor solution to overcrowding because it simply puts criminal offenders back on the streets."

Northern Santa Barbara County is growing rapidly in population with a concurrent increase in criminal activity. In 2004, an average of 55% of the inmates incarcerated in the Santa Barbara Main Jail were from the North County. In that area, there is one temporary holding facility with 35 beds which is located in Santa Maria. After 96 hours, arrestees must either be transported to the Main Jail or be released.

Secure vehicles are required on a daily basis to transport inmates from the Main Jail facility in the South County for arraignment, court hearings and trials in the North County. The resulting staff, fuel, and vehicle maintenance and replacement costs significantly impact the Sheriff's Department annual budget. In the year 2004, transportation costs exceeded \$350,000.

The Sheriff is aware of the acute need for a North County jail and his responsibility to be in compliance with the court order and the mandates of the State Board of Corrections. To this end, the Department has been studying possible locations for such a facility and has gone so far as to set aside money from its budget to fund such studies. The Board of Supervisors has long acknowledged the need, but has not specifically allocated any funds.

In March 2000, Measure U2000, a tax initiative proposing a sales tax increase to build a new jail facility in North County, was placed on the ballot. It failed to pass. Dramatic changes in population statistics and demographics suggest that the issue should now be revisited. Whether there are one or two counties in the future, it is time for the Board of Supervisors to accept the fact that the existing jail facility is no longer adequate. This issue has been before the Board of Supervisors for years and previous Grand Juries have also brought attention to the situation.

Investigation

The Grand Jury inspected the Main Jail facility as part of its annual required visit. We interviewed correctional personnel and scrutinized population statistics. We reviewed Grand Jury Final Reports dating back to 1994 as well as the Board of Corrections findings regarding Santa Barbara County jail population issues.

Finally, we attended the Board of Supervisors general meeting on April 12, 2005, during which the Santa Barbara County Sheriff gave a detailed presentation on the critical need for a North County jail. Following that presentation, the BOS, by a unanimous vote, directed the Sheriff and the Chief Executive Officer to proceed with plans for a North County jail at the Laguna Sanitation District site near Santa Maria. They were also directed to find new alternatives for relieving short-term overcrowding and present recommendations to the Board.

Findings:

1. The Main Jail, located in the South County, is overcrowded.
2. In 2004, 55% percent of the jail population was from the northern part of the county.
3. An estimated 1,575 beds will be needed to house inmates in this county by the year 2020.
4. The County Board of Supervisors has now directed the Chief Executive Officer to allocate funds for the land acquisition and studies needed to build a North County jail.

Recommendations:

1. The Board of Supervisors should continue in earnest to build the North County jail.
2. The Board of Supervisors should present to the public several workable solutions to fund and operate a North County jail.

Affected Agencies

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4
Recommendations 1, 2

Santa Barbara County Sheriff Department

Findings 1, 2, 3