

NORTH COUNTY JAIL

A Step at a Time

SUMMARY

For two decades and through the leadership of four Sheriffs, the North County Jail has been an elusive target. Over twenty Grand Juries, most recently the 2006-2007 Grand Jury, have recommended that Santa Barbara County set aside funds and do whatever is necessary to alleviate the problem of overcrowding at the Main Jail in the Goleta Valley. With each report, the County has responded as required, stating that while it recognizes the need for a North County Jail, the cost is prohibitive. Funding, primarily through the Justice Facilities Fund and Vehicle License Fees, has helped with a number of studies and needs assessments. The problems with funding and operating a large new jail facility have been well documented, but that does not alleviate the County's responsibility to take measurable steps to correct the problem.

There might be a light at the end of the tunnel for a major portion of the funding needed to construct a new North County Jail through California Assembly Bill 900, the Public Safety and Offender Rehabilitation Services Act of 2007. This Act provides funding for state and county jail construction and renovation. Additionally, AB900 addresses the need for a re-entry program for state prison parolees. Only those who are scheduled to be paroled to Santa Barbara County would be eligible for this program.

The 2007-2008 Grand Jury recommends that the Sheriff and the Board of Supervisors continue to study and decide on the merits of the State's proposal. However, regardless of the outcome of the County's involvement with AB900, the Grand Jury believes it is imperative that the County make a concerted effort to obtain the property where this facility, or any other version of it, will reside. In order to comply with AB900's requirements for funding, the Board of Supervisors must approve the purchase of a site for the new facility by March 2008. The purchase of property for a North County Jail would be a positive first step in alleviating the overcrowding problem.

INTRODUCTION

Every year that passes, the costs go up and the problem of overcrowded conditions in the Main Jail increases. A 1995 court order to relieve jail overcrowding has not been fully implemented because there are no new cells in which to place inmates. The only ways to relieve overcrowding have been through work furlough, electronic monitoring, and early release programs. Originally, those programs were for non-violent misdemeanor offenders. That is no longer the case. Inmates of all classifications are being released from the jail to make room for the newest offenders. In essence, it is a revolving door . . . and a dangerous one. Ignoring the need will not resolve the problem.

The last two major structures at the Main Jail, the Northwest Wing (1987) and the Inmate Reception Center (1993) were built with the aid of state bond funds. The nineteen-bed Violent

Offender Wing Addition in the Main Jail (1999) was funded through a state grant. In all likelihood, any additional major construction will need to have, as a major component, outside-of-county funding. The County attempted in 2000 to increase the local sales tax to provide funding for the jail and juvenile facilities; however, it failed by a large margin. The prevailing feeling of all parties is that a tax increase would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

There may be a way for the County to receive state funding for a new jail through AB900. In essence, the State also recognizes a real need to alleviate overcrowded conditions in the state prison system as well as the county jails in California. AB900, through competitive grants, would distribute \$1.2 billion dollars for local county jails to help alleviate overcrowding conditions. To Santa Barbara County that could mean substantial, but not total, funding for a North County Jail. An additional provision would award points toward the competitive grants for providing housing for released state prisoners who would complete their state prison sentences in a rehabilitation facility housed in the county in conjunction with the new county jail.

While the final provisions of the grant process are not yet completed, it is apparent that assisted funding for a new North County Jail is closer to reality than has been realized in over twenty years.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury is required to inspect the County's "prisons" every term. A separate report will discuss the results of the Grand Jury's investigations into the various county and city detention facilities.

The Grand Jury interviewed past and present members of the Sheriff's Department, members of the Sheriff's Blue Ribbon Commission on Jail Overcrowding, county staff, members of the California Corrections Standards Authority and members of the County Board of Supervisors. The Grand Jury also reviewed previous Grand Jury reports, past and current news articles, and state journals. Additionally, the Grand Jury toured the two desired sites for a North County Jail.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

This year, AB900 provides funding for state and county jail construction and renovation. Additionally, AB900 addresses the need for a re-entry program for state prison inmates. Counties may compete solely for funding for county jails without partnering with the state on the re-entry program. The concept of a re-entry program is fairly new. There is a saying that the only preparation for re-entry into the community for a paroled state prison offender is \$200.00 and a bus ticket. Parolees reoffend at a rate of about 70%. Placing a parolee a year prior to the scheduled date of release into a secure local facility that can take the time and provide resources to help the parolee assimilate into the community has merit. The re-entry facility for parolees would include such services as vocational training, counseling, job-search skills, and alcohol and drug abuse programs.

The process is competitive, with funding being dependent on points awarded for various criteria. Extra points are awarded to counties which include a re-entry facility for state parolees.

Additional points are awarded to counties which provide mental health and crisis care for those parolees.

Santa Barbara County is actively seeking AB900 funds. Previous years' funding requests have been based on the number of county jail inmates alone. The requests have varied from a 400-bed facility to an 800-bed facility based on studies that forecast the probable inmate population growth over a number of years. Due to the apparent need for State funds to help build the facility and the requirements of participation with the State re-entry program in order to receive substantial funds, the Sheriff has publicly stated that a facility that would house 300 county inmates and 500 state re-entry parolees would be desirable. The funding breakdown between the County and State would be fixed by agreement. In essence, the State would pay the operations costs for its 500 beds and the County would pay the operations costs of its 300 beds. In addition, the State would pay for approximately 63% of the construction costs.

There are already community concerns about "importing" State inmates into Santa Barbara County through the parolee re-entry program. The Grand Jury has been assured that in order for the re-entry program to be accepted by the County, there must be two conditions guaranteed: 1) that only inmates who were already scheduled for parole in Santa Barbara County be released from state prison to the county re-entry program and 2) that the facility be operated solely by Santa Barbara County Corrections Deputies and not State Corrections Officers.

AB900 provides an opportunity for state funding assistance that has not been available for years. The Grand Jury believes that the concept and practicality of the project have merit and will urge the County and the Sheriff to continue pursuing funding for the co-located facilities. However, the Grand Jury's primary focus is that the County takes one positive step and purchase the land necessary for the construction of such a facility. In order for the county to be eligible for state funding under AB900, there must be an assurance conveyed to the State that the property is available. That assurance is required by mid-March 2008. Additionally, should the grant be awarded to the County, escrow on the property must be closed within 90 days of the award. It is anticipated that the awards for funding will be announced in early May 2008.

There are two primary North County jail sites being studied by the Sheriff and County. The Laguna Sanitation site on Black Road is less expensive; however, there would need to be extensive improvements on the property to make it suitable. The Sutti property at Black and Betteravia Roads is more expensive but would require fewer improvements for it to be viable. The Grand Jury does not recommend one property over the other.

CONCLUSION

The 2006-2007 Grand Jury recommended that the County explore various funding options for the North County Jail. In part, the County's response stated: ". . . *should a Construction Grant become available in the future, in order to be competitive it would be important that the County would have already secured the land upon which to build a jail. Thus, it is important that the County continue with the land acquisition process.*" We strongly agree.

The Grand Jury further believes that even if an award from AB900 funds are not granted, the purchase of property for a North County Jail is a positive first step in solving the escalating overcrowding problem.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

AB900 provides an opportunity for Santa Barbara County to compete for funding for a major portion of the North County Jail. A condition for that funding is for the County to partner with the State for a secure parolee re-entry program.

Recommendation 1

The Sheriff and the Board of Supervisors should continue to pursue funding for the North County Jail through the AB900 competitive grant process.

Finding 2

In order to qualify for AB900 funds, the County must convey an assurance to the State that property has been secured that will satisfy the requirements for the construction of the approved facility. That assurance is due by mid-March 2008. Escrow for the property must close within 90 days of the award of funds from AB900.

Recommendation 2

The County Board of Supervisors should approve, by March 2008, the purchase of property sufficient to build the recommended North County Jail.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with Section 933(c) of the California Penal Code, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each.

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Findings 1, 2
Recommendations 1, 2

Santa Barbara County Sheriff – 60 days

Finding 1
Recommendation 1