

Jail Study Recommends New Building

Proposed Annex Placed Near Landfill

November 21, 2014

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Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — A proposed new jail facility for Harrisonburg and Rockingham County is taking shape.

Moseley Architects released a planning study Thursday recommending construction of a new annex facility at a site adjacent to the Rockingham County Landfill.

Deputy County Administrator Stephen King confirmed the address of the location as 1120 Willow Springs Road, east of Interstate 81 in southern Harrisonburg.

Although the site is located within the city limits, the land is owned by Rockingham County.

The existing 98,000-squarefoot Rockingham County Jail on South Liberty Street in downtown Harrisonburg was built in 1994 with 208 beds.

For years, officials have been exploring options to relieve overcrowding at the facility, a joint operation of city and Rockingham County.

In July, the city and county contracted with Richmond based Moseley Architects to conduct the planning study and a community-based corrections study, which is required before a new facility could be built.

The planning study involves site assessment of potential new locations, while the corrections study explores how to reduce incarceration numbers, new construction possibilities, and how other communities have used alternative forms of sentencing and what resources are needed for such programs.

According to the planning study, the annex would “primarily be a minimum security, treatment and program based building” with 315 beds.

It would also house all women prisoners and include a mental health housing unit and a less secure “community custody wing.”

The wing would provide dormitory- style housing for inmates involved with work release, education release, work programs and re-entry programs.

As the existing downtown facility cannot be expanded, the study recommends it house only male inmates under medium and maximum security. It was originally built as a maximum security jail.

Of the 523 total beds between the two facilities, 80 percent are expected to be filled by men.

The community custody wing will hold 73 beds, which is included in the 523 total.

Between the two facilities, 45 percent of inmates are expected to be classified as minimum security or community custody.

Another 37 percent would be medium security, with the remaining 18 percent of inmates classified as maximum security.

The annex would also include visitation rooms, four classrooms, a library, indoor and outdoor recreation spaces, medical offices and detox cells.

The total cost of the project is estimated at more than \$63.26 million, half of which would come from the state and the rest split between the city and county.

The cost includes a possible future expansion of the new facility to accommodate an additional 385 beds — for a total of 700 — estimated to cost \$5.78 million.

The annex would be 144,000 square feet, with the option to expand to 230,140 square feet in the future.

The South Liberty Street jail can hold up to 315 inmates when double bunks are placed in cells, but the city and county had an average daily jail population of 450 at the end of fiscal year 2014 in June.

As a result, the city and county have been renting 100 beds at Middle River Regional Jail in Verona, splitting the \$1.2 million annual cost.

According to the community based corrections plan, also submitted by Moseley Architects on Thursday, the jail saw a 47 percent increase in its inmate population from the end of 2012 to June 2014.

Between 2008 and 2011, jail populations throughout the state saw populations level off or decline, the study said.

According to the study, the city and county's higher incarceration rates are partially due to increased incidences of probation violations, an overburdened court system, growth in the community and an increasing number of substance abuse offenders.

Reaction from residents has largely been against construction of a new facility. Opponents have called for a greater emphasis on alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders, better mental health treatment and options for work release and weekend programs.

King said the Harrisonburg/ Rockingham Community Criminal Justice Board would meet on Dec. 8 at 4 p.m. to discuss Moseley's findings.

King said the meeting would probably take place in the Fire and Rescue Training room in the County Administration Center at 20 E. Gay St. It will be open to the public.

Officials aim to submit a corrections study to the state by the end of the year. With state approval expected to take roughly a year, officials are hoping to receive state funding for construction in 2016.

If the funds are approved then, the study plans for the new facility to open in March 2020.

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