

Contra Costa Plan for Big Jail Expansion Moves Forward Despite Opposition



By Sukey Lewis

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The fate of a proposed [\\$90 million expansion](#) of Richmond's West County Detention Facility will move on to state officials next week after a 3-1 vote in favor by the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors.

Supervisor John Gioia's lone vote against the project, however, may prove fatal for a proposal that has faced opposition from the Richmond City Council, the faith community and immigrant rights activists.

Contra Costa County Sheriff David Livingston put his case to the board on Tuesday, saying that he needs 400 new beds at West County and a state-of-the-art facility to humanely house and treat inmates currently held at the overcrowded Martinez Detention Facility.

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Martinez, which opened in 1981, was built for single-cell occupancy, but inmates there are double-bunked and, according to the sheriff, not receiving mental health treatment or services for re-entering the community, such as job training or education.

“Politics aside and philosophical jail rhetoric aside,” Livingston said, “this plan makes sense, leverages our existing facilities already in place, provides much needed re-entry and treatment services, and ultimately makes our county safer.”

Along with inadequate services in the Martinez facility, the sheriff pointed to the increased number of inmates as a result of state prison “realignment.” Livingston said there are about 96 realignment inmates currently in the county’s facilities.

The vote in favor of the plan allows the sheriff to apply for \$80 million in construction funding from the Board of State and Community Corrections — but the proposal still needs four of the five members of the county board to approve about \$10 million in matching funds. Supervisor Federal Glover, who could be the deciding vote, was absent Tuesday after undergoing heart and kidney transplant surgery. In addition to the \$10 million in construction funds, the new jail is projected to cost the county around \$4.4 million annually.

The meeting was packed, with about 70 speakers voicing strong opinions both for and against the jail project. Local activist groups like Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community and Safe Return Project were joined by representatives from the National Nurses United union holding signs saying, “Health care, not jails!”

“Here in Contra Costa County — not just West County — we don’t need another jail,” said Kathryn Wade, an ex-Contra Costa mental health care worker, who was echoed by many when she asked where the funding was for health care and outside of incarceration.

Residents said the board should be putting money toward new health care services following the April closure of Doctors Medical Center in Pinole.

“Yet we see a sheriff’s department wants to come with this fabulous plan,” Wade said. “Once again you’re looking at the tears of a black woman. I say no to the jail expansion.”

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Along with many Richmond residents and activists, both Richmond Police Chief [Chris Magnus](#) and the Richmond City Council [oppose](#) the jail expansion.

“This is now the third time the sheriff’s office has attempted to expand the West County Detention Facility,” said Terrance Cheung, an aide to Richmond Mayor Tom Butt. “In 2012 they wanted to expand the West County Detention Facility by 150 beds, in 2013 they wanted to expand the West County Detention Facility by 240 beds, and now the sheriff wants to expand the West County Detention Facility by 416 beds.”

Contra Costa resident Teresa Pasquini offered one of the most impassioned pleas in favor of the new facility.

“I speak today as the proud mom of an adult child with schizophrenic disorder; he is also inmate 201202796. However, he is more than an illness and a number. His name is Danny, and he is my son,” she said, adding that she has relied on sheriff’s deputies to help her deal with her son’s mental illness. “I support this proposal because it is a step up from our current state, which is grossly inhumane.”

Supervisors Candace Andersen and Karen Mitchoff, who voted in favor of the project, said that it was in line with the county’s re-entry strategy and would better help inmates begin the process of returning to their communities. Gioia, whose district includes Richmond, said he would not support the plan because it wasn’t the best use of county funds. He said \$2.5 million in treatment services projected for the new facility might be the first to be cut in the future.

“When other law enforcement departments come before us and say, ‘We need more money for law enforcement,’ frankly the money for re-entry always ends up being secondary,” Gioia said.

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