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Contra Costa County Supervisors Approve Jail Expansion

Richmond's vice mayor recommended putting the facilities in Walnut Creek and Danville. Treatment and rehabilitation programs will expand.

By [California Patch \(Patch Staff\)](#) - February 8, 2017 1:07 pm ET

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CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CA - During a crowded and occasionally unruly meeting that lasted several hours, the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 Wednesday to approve a proposal to expand a jail in Richmond.

Supervisor John Gioia cast the sole dissenting vote against the proposal.

The vote allows the sheriff's office to apply for a competitive state grant offering up to \$70 million to expand treatment and rehabilitation programs, including mental health services, at the West County Detention Facility in Richmond.

Representing the Sheriff's office, Capt. Thomas Chalk said the expansion is necessary because the county's only high-security facility in Martinez is overcrowded and offers only independent study, religious services and a library cart to its inmates.

The sheriff's office wants to transfer 416 high-security inmates to a new building within the West County Detention Facility, where they plan to incorporate 31,500 square feet of programming space.

Supervisor Candace Andersen said the expansion would provide much-needed mental health and reentry services to a population that currently has limited access to rehabilitation programs. "This is one tool to help those that are in jail who need strong support services so that when they get out we don't have them cycling back," Andersen said.

Gioia said he felt the funds being used to expand the facilities could be better applied toward mental health services prior to incarceration. "I still believe that spending \$25 million to construct this expansion and \$5 million ongoing could be better spent and have more wide benefit in mental health, in services for people prior to incarceration and after incarceration," Gioia said.

Several critics of the plan, which included a number of representatives from community and faith-based organizations, who spoke at length demanded the supervisors reject the proposal, saying jail expansion was not the answer to the county's mental health issues.

The crowd erupted into applause when Vice Mayor of Richmond, Jovanka Beckles said that mental health was being used a smokescreen to expand the jails, and recommended putting the facilities in Walnut Creek and Danville as opposed to a "city of color."

"The Richmond community does not want to expand the jail. What we want is mental health services prior to incarceration. What we want are in-house and in-patient health services. What we want are investments in hospitals and investments in schools," Beckles said.

Beckles continued by criticizing mass incarceration, saying that it tends to masquerade as so many other things, with mental health often in the forefront.

With the approval from the Board, the sheriff's office now has until Feb. 28 to turn in the application.

— *Bay City News; Image via Shutterstock*