

## Richmond: Contra Costa supes move forward with controversial new jail project



Inmates make their way to the bus as they get transferred to West County from the Contra Costa County Jail in Martinez, Calif. on Wednesday, March 21, 2007.

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**MARTINEZ** — Despite pleas from community activists, educators, nurses and others, the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to move forward with a controversial plan to expand jail services at the West County Detention Facility, a project that will cost the county \$25 million in construction costs and \$5 million a year thereafter.

The project, which would require \$70 million in state funds, was approved in a 4-1 vote, with Supervisor John Gioia opposed. The money would be used to build a high-security wing at the jail located in Richmond and transfer up to 400 inmates currently housed at the Martinez Detention Facility, which is operating at nearly double its intended capacity. The Sheriff's Office touts the plan as a way to offer more mental health treatment and other services to high-security offenders at the Martinez jail, where they don't have access to programs because of a lack of space.

But opponents — more than 50 of whom spoke out against the project Tuesday — say the plan expends precious county resources when they are at risk of being cut by the federal government, and wrongly focuses on people already incarcerated rather than channeling money toward prevention.

“There are no resources currently in West County to obtain mental health services after the closure of Doctors Medical Center and a detox center in Richmond,” said Claudia Jimenez, a member of the [Contra Costa Racial Justice Coalition](#). “The great irony of this project is that you have to first get arrested in order to obtain any services.”



Aerial shot of

the West County Detention Facility.

The new facility would offer mental health and vocational services, a child-visitation center, and rehabilitation and re-entry programs, which inmates currently don't have.

[See the PowerPoint presentation about the proposal here](#)

The project would not result in a net gain of jail beds, something the Sheriff's Office took great pains to emphasize.

“I agree that we need to invest in people, but we also need to address inmates' needs when they are in jail,” said Sheriff's Captain Tom Chalk. “The alternative is doing nothing.”

The majority of the funding for the 150,000-square-foot expansion of the Richmond jail would come from a \$70 million grant from the Criminal Justice Facilities Construction fund. The fund was created to help counties update their jail facilities and is part of the state-mandated prison realignment in 2011. That legislation gave counties money to house nonviolent, nonserious and non-sex offenders in local jails.

The final decision whether the county gets the money rests with the [California Board of State and Community Corrections](#), to which the Sheriff's Office will submit the proposal later this month.

On Tuesday, testimony against the project took nearly three hours as opponents argued that the plan was not a good use of county funds. Others said they worried that the beds freed up by the move to Richmond would be used to hold undocumented immigrants for federal officials. Contra Costa County has a \$3 million annual contract with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to temporarily house undocumented immigrants awaiting court.

“I submit that by having this contract — especially at this time in our country — we pay a price through an erosion of trust in law enforcement institutions by our immigrant community,” Gioia said.

Contra Costa Sheriff David Livingston missed the meeting because he was in Washington, D.C., for a conference and was one of six California sheriffs to meet with U.S. Attorney General nominee Jeff Sessions, according to the Washington Examiner.

Supervisors who support the expanded Richmond jail said they understood the need to fund preventive mental health, early childhood initiatives, after-school programs and other services for county residents, but believed the project could help the more than 1,000 county inmates currently incarcerated in Contra Costa County. Under the proposal, the county would hire 16 program personnel, including counselors and case managers and 12 deputies and sheriff’s aides.

“The goal is to keep people out of jail, but once they are there, we do need to help them,” said Supervisor Candace Andersen, who represents San Ramon, Danville, Lafayette and Moraga.

On Tuesday, the decision ultimately came down to new Supervisor Diane Burgis, who represents East Contra Costa and joined the board in January. Burgis shared her own story of having a brother who suffers from schizophrenia and has been arrested before.

“I would have never thought that you would be relieved to have a loved one arrested and put in jail,” Burgis told the audience. “For lots of families, this is a particular opportunity to get them the help they need.”