

Commentary: Contra Costa needs more prevention, not more jail cells



Aerial shot of the West County Detention Facility. File photo nu Ray Chavez

By **JOHN GIOIA, JANE FISCHBERG AND CLAUDIA JIMENEZ** |

PUBLISHED: February 14, 2017 at 12:33 pm | UPDATED: February 14, 2017 at 12:35 pm

Contra Costa County needs greater investment in mental health treatment, job training, affordable housing, and youth services to help keep people from becoming incarcerated, not a larger West County jail.

Approving expensive new jail construction runs counter to the more fiscally responsible and humane strategy of investing greater resources in prevention and rehabilitation services. These cost-effective measures help keep people out of jail, reduce reoffending and improve public safety.

The recent 4-1 vote by the Board of Supervisors to spend \$25 million in county funds and apply for \$70 million from the state to add 416 high-security beds at the West County Detention Facility in Richmond comes at a time of budgetary uncertainty, with the county facing possible federal funding cutbacks from the new presidential administration.

The Prison Law Office, a well-respected nonprofit public interest law firm specializing in jail system reform, wrote to the Board of Supervisors that “The county would better serve its population by expanding efforts to reduce the jail population instead of expanding the capacity of its jails.”

We could not agree more.

The county's focus should be on spending our limited tax dollars on programs that are proven to keep people out of jail and help previously incarcerated individuals successfully re-enter their communities after serving time. This approach ultimately costs less and cuts crime.

The approved jail plan calls for spending \$2 million more per year to hire additional sheriff deputies to staff an expanded jail. Those dollars should instead be invested in expanding programs proven to reduce incarceration, such as substance abuse treatment and Behavioral Health Court, which provides vital mental health treatment to people with chronic mental illness.

This is a more cost-effective and humane approach.

Another way to reduce our jail population and improve public safety is to reform our bail system, which currently uses the ability to pay for bail as the primary factor in deciding who should remain incarcerated while awaiting trial.

A wiser system, gaining popularity, is to base incarceration while awaiting trial on the risk of reoffending or fleeing. Approximately 70 percent of those in county jail haven't been convicted and are awaiting trial, many for lower level non-violent drug or property offenses.

Also, the sheriff can create capacity in the West County jail instead of building new cells. Nearly 200 individuals are being held for possible deportation at the West County jail under a sheriff's contract with the U.S. Department of Justice to house ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detainees.

That's 20 percent of the jail's capacity that could be used to meet the county's needs, not the federal government's.

Contra Costa is the only Bay Area county with such a contract. This cooperation with ICE should end. It erodes our hard-working immigrant community's trust in local law enforcement and county government.

Health and social service community agencies report that many immigrants have cancelled appointments out of anxiety, fear of deportation, or mistrust — not getting critical care.

Sheriff David Livingston's cooperation with ICE, and traveling to Washington D.C. and meeting with controversial Attorney General Jeff Sessions on the day of the Board of Supervisor's jail vote have further eroded community trust.

We can do better.

The community has a chance to express its opposition to this unwise jail expansion project when the issue comes back to the Board of Supervisors after the state decides whether to support the funding request.

Please speak out in favor of policies that invest our tax dollars in effective prevention programs, not costly jail construction.

John Gioia is a Contra Costa supervisor. Jane Fischberg is CEO of Rubicon Programs. Claudia Jimenez is with the Contra Costa Racial Justice Coalition.