

Opposition to jail expansion could cost El Cerrito dispatch contract

By **SAM RICHARDS** | srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com |

PUBLISHED: April 17, 2017 at 1:08 pm | UPDATED: April 17, 2017 at 3:07 pm

EL CERRITO — Contra Costa County Sheriff David Livingston pledges to back out of a five-year deal to provide police dispatch services to the city because of its formal opposition to a proposed expansion of the West County jail.

If that Jan. 17 agreement is voided, El Cerrito could face paying \$750,000 over the next five years in added dispatch costs, according to a Friday email from El Cerrito City Manager Scott Hanin to City Council members.

Livingston notified El Cerrito Mayor Janet Abelson in a Monday morning letter that the council's April 4 letter to the California Board of State and Community Corrections opposing the sheriff's \$70 million grant request for the jail calls into question the "cooperation, mutual respect and an understanding of the duties and obligations" of the sheriff and the city. Livingston said his office is "no longer considering" that five-year agreement.

"Unfortunately, the El Cerrito City Council put politics ahead of good public policy," Livingston said Monday in a statement. "They weighed into a matter that has zero impact on the citizens of El Cerrito and ironically attacked the very agency they now want services from. In doing so, they demonstrated they cannot be good public safety partners."

El Cerrito Councilwoman Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto said Monday she is "not completely surprised" that Livingston has taken this stance. "It is more disappointing than surprising to see an elected official would retaliate against a city and its residents over an unrelated matter."

Pardue-Okimoto said she and the council will weigh their options regarding both a response to the Sheriff's Office and police dispatching. The city's current dispatch contract with the city of Richmond ends June 30. "If the sheriff won't cooperate with us, we'll have to find other means. We have to have these services."

In its April 4 letter, the El Cerrito council said the jail-expansion money should instead be spent on programs to help prisoners re-enter society or help keep them out of jail entirely, or perhaps on a full-service hospital. Doctors Hospital in San Pablo closed two years ago.

The Richmond City Council voted in 2015 to oppose the jail expansion. And on Friday, state Sen. Nancy Skinner, D-Oakland, asked the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors to reverse its approval of the jail expansion, saying it promotes incarceration instead of helping keep people out of jail.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said Monday he considers Livingston's move unfair and unjustified, and has asked County Administrator David Twa to work with Livingston to save the dispatch agreement.

Gioia was the lone "no" vote when the Board of Supervisors on Feb. 7 voted 4-1 to support the 120,000-square-foot, 400-bed jail-expansion project. He decried the fact the county will still have to contribute \$25 million in one-time construction costs to the project, and said any new or expanded jail should place a greater emphasis on mental health treatment.

Monday, he also questioned Livingston walking away from a \$2.5 million, five-year contract. "That's his department giving up that revenue," Gioia said.

In his Friday email to council members, Hanin said that if El Cerrito's contract with the Sheriff's Office can't be salvaged, the city would likely be forced to re-up with Richmond for dispatch services, at a considerable cost — about \$3.25 million. That extra \$750,000, Hanin told council members, could mean service cuts within the city, and could also impact contract talks with city employees.

Also on Jan. 17, El Cerrito approved a three-year agreement for the Contra Costa County Fire District to provide fire dispatch services for the city. That agreement takes effect June 1. The fire dispatch agreement is not affected by whatever happens with the police dispatch agreement, Gioia said.