

Jail expansion clears final hurdle with Contra Costa supervisors vote

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MARTINEZ — A \$25 million grant for a controversial expansion of the West County Detention Facility in Richmond was approved Tuesday by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, the last major hurdle for this project.

Before their 4-1 vote, which authorized funds to complement a \$70 million state grant issued June 13 for the \$95 million project, the supervisors heard from a long line of speakers, almost all opposing the expansion. Many had filled this chamber and spoken to the supervisors before, condemning the jail expansion and the establishment of mental health treatment facilities there. These various speakers — health care professionals, community activists, elected officials, individuals — said the services planned for the jail would be better utilized in a non-jail setting.

One speaker slammed the supervisors for allowing Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo to close in April 2015 and for then supporting the jail expansion, which will cost an estimated \$5 million a year. Others called the jail services a “short-term solution to a long-term problem,” and blasted spending any money to build more jail beds at the expense of other public services.

The cities of Richmond, San Pablo and El Cerrito have formally opposed the project; the latter city paid for that opposition by losing out on an agreement for the Contra Costa Sheriff’s Office to provide police dispatch services to the city

In defending her position, Supervisor Candace Andersen of Danville spent several minutes reading a list of various behavioral health programs the county offers outside jail walls, and said the county spent \$252 million in the fiscal year ending June 30 on those programs. It’s the jail, she said, that falls short on these services.

“Those of you who came here today don’t want to listen to the truth,” Andersen told a raucous crowd, which at various points Tuesday was singing “We Shall Overcome” and trying to shout down the supervisors’ comments. Supervisor

Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, finally told the protesters, “This is the people’s business being done here; you can be part of it, or you can be removed.”

Andersen and fellow Supervisor Karen Mitchoff of Concord said other parts of the health and rehabilitation communities have supported the jail expansion and its 96 treatment beds. These voices have, for the most part, shied away from public attention.

“It’s not just the loudest voices; it’s the voices of reason that we also hear,” Andersen said.

The only behavioral health care in Contra Costa’s jails is in the overcrowded Martinez facility.

“We have to be prepared to take all comers, regardless of their mental state at the time,” county Sheriff David Livingston told the supervisors Tuesday. “I don’t have a choice.”

The only “no” vote Tuesday, as in the board’s previous jail-expansion votes, was Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond. He agreed with much of the audience in the supervisors’ chamber Tuesday about the need for community services, and about the Sheriff’s Office’s \$6 million annual federal contract to hold detainees of the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“We pay a price for that \$3 or \$4 million a year in revenue — a loss of trust in the immigrant communities,” said Gioia, who wishes that contract would go away. But he said there’s a silver lining to the jail-expansion discussion, which he said isn’t over.

“I think a movement has been started here,” he said.