

Opinion: Imagine a better way than jail expansion



By **JUDITH TANNENBAUM** |

June 23, 2017 at 9:05 am

Imagine. On a recent Tuesday, my day began as the Board of Supervisors focused again on Sheriff David Livingston's plans for the West County Detention Facility. My day ended in the El Cerrito City Council chambers.

After more than two hours of public comments, the Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 to commit \$25 million of county money (and \$5 million more annually) to support the sheriff's proposal. At the close of the nighttime meeting, El Cerrito Council members were clear about the enormity of the challenge they face: Fairmont School is way beyond capacity and the West Contra Costa Unified School District plans to take back the space El Cerrito's Senior Center has occupied for 50 years. Where will the Senior Center go?

The City Council chambers were filled, mostly with seniors and also with some parents of Fairmont Elementary students. A dozen speakers shared what the Senior Center means to them; a few spoke about their commitment to Fairmont and the children's need for more space. Almost everyone spoke with lots of heart and compassion for all (seniors for kids; parents for old people).

Of course, these are completely different pots of money but, still — having spent the day as I had — I couldn't help being even more incensed than I already was

at all the county funds going into an unnecessary jail project instead of toward senior centers and public schools.

The tone of the Board of Supervisors meeting was furious anger since, except for John Gioia, our supervisors don't seem able to look from any point of view other than the sheriff's. The tone of the City Council meeting was sad as we all pondered how to provide for the real needs of real people, especially since those needs appeared to be in conflict.

The two meetings shared one big frustration, though: the Board of Supervisors and WCCUSD are both making extremely important and costly decisions from mind-sets that are too small and, therefore, limit consideration of a wider range of options.

At the Board of Supervisors meeting, one man used his public comment time to lead the more than 100 of us filling the chambers in singing "We Shall Overcome," This was not only a welcome gift in the midst of discouragement, but was also precisely appropriate. For more than one speaker compared our opposition to mass incarceration (as manifested in the sheriff's proposal) as today's civil rights movement. One speaker said that the supervisors' responses to our opposition was our Edmund Pettis Bridge moment.

At the El Cerrito City Council, though, it wasn't "We Shall Overcome" that was called for. Instead, one senior speaker told us that he'd been thinking of John Lennon's "Imagine." He asked the council and all of us to imagine a solution that worked for both seniors and kids, and, therefore, for the whole community.

Singing "We Shall Overcome" together at the supervisors meeting felt good. But, really, what I've been wishing for since the supervisors' February vote supporting the sheriff's proposal is that they, too, would imagine.

For there's a lot we all agree on: We all think conditions at the jail in Martinez are horrific. We all think it is a public obligation to offer services and programming to people inside our jails. We all think that it's important to spend county funds wisely.

In El Cerrito, there seems to be shared goodwill that will encourage imagining together. That goodwill is in much more limited supply between most of the supervisors and their constituents. Still, I continue to hope that we can find a

process large enough to allow us to imagine together alternatives other than the one voted on by the supervisors.

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