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Jail needs keep growing

Johnson County has spent \$36.8 million to board out jail inmates over the last five years. This huge cost is a compelling factor as county commissioners seek renewal of a quarter-cent sales tax to finance a broad public safety initiative. The issue will be on the Aug. 5 primary ballot.

A county analysis shows the problem. Last year the jail population averaged 863 inmates a day. The facilities can accommodate only 533 prisoners. The rest of them must be incarcerated by contract with 18 detention facilities across Kansas. In a time of ever-increasing fuel costs, the expense of transporting the inmates to and from court appearances is also a consideration.

Transportation and a medical allowance for each inmate is included in the cost, said Kent Brown, chief financial officer for the sheriff's office.

The boarding is not new. Brown said sheriff's records for temporary housing date to 1967, when the annual budget for it was \$10,000.

Jail Expansion

The county's share of the tax revenue, estimated at \$19.6 million a year, would help fund a jail expansion that began last year, and its operation. Officials say it will double jail capacity when it is completed next year. In addition to the new construction and operations, the tax proceeds are earmarked for conversion of the existing jail in downtown Olathe to a booking facility for the corrections system.

The county is attempting to recover from the loss of infrastructure revenue that went to the six school districts during a shortfall in state education funding in recent years. That led to a delay in several public safety projects as needs escalated rapidly.

Juvenile Services

The juvenile detention facilities pose a similar space problem. In 2007, the average daily population was 68 offenders, although it jumped to 79 in May. There are only 70 beds. With a mixed population of males, females and dangerous offenders who require segregation, the functional capacity of the facility is 63 beds.

The county commissioners plan to build a new, larger juvenile services complex that would consolidate corrections programs, counseling and substance abuse services into what officials describe as a single family-friendly site. The proposal would provide up to 33 spaces for low-risk offenders who currently may be temporarily housed up to 125 miles from Johnson County. That separation is difficult for families in crisis.

Crime Laboratory

The third leg of the initiative is construction and operation of a crime laboratory to replace a facility in Mission that has been in use since 1974. A county explanation notes the lab serves all Johnson County police departments, the district attorney, the sheriff, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and other law enforcement agencies.

The lab conducts many tests and other services vital to criminal cases, among them DNA analysis, processing of crime scene evidence, latent print identification and arson debris analysis. Currently the quarters are inadequate, officials say.

The ballot language covers other aspects of public safety. It lists Med-Act, emergency and dispatch communications, and corrections. Additionally, the revenue would finance the administration of justice, "including courts, district attorney, and other county legal services, which will include both the operations related to those programs and the acquisition, construction, repair, maintenance, and/or improvement of real and personal property, buildings, and other structures necessary for those county government purposes ..."

Under state law, the proceeds from the tax would be shared with the cities, with about one-third going to the municipalities.

The current tax expires Dec. 31. It is now up to the commissioners to inform prospective voters of the need to keep public safety current with our rapidly growing county.

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