

County Pushes \$1.5 Million Juvenile-Detention Project Forward

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Scott County is moving forward with a \$1.5 million plan to expand and remodel its juvenile-detention facility, and construction could start early next year. The Scott County Board of Supervisors on August 31 unanimously approved a resolution authorizing county staff to begin negotiations for planning, design, and architectural services. Glen Erickson, the county administrator, said he expects to have architectural plans completed within six months. Construction can begin when supervisors accept a construction bid.

Although the plan sailed through the Board of Supervisors, not everybody's happy about it. Karl Rhomberg, a candidate for the board, said supervisors have not considered alternatives and simply swallowed a consultant's recommendations whole. "There have been no questions asked," he said.

Rhomberg has been asking a lot of questions himself, many of them rhetorical. "I'm questioning the absolutely bloated cost of solving this problem," he said. "I'm not questioning the need."

The project would expand the juvenile facility, in the Scott County Annex at 518 W. 4th St. in Davenport, from 10 beds to 15. The building will be expanded to the north, where 10 beds will be added. Renovation of the existing detention center will eliminate five beds to create multipurpose areas for education and recreation, and to move the control room. The plan has been designed to allow for a future 10-bed expansion, as well.

"The renovation is nearly as important as the addition of beds," said Scott Hobart, director of the juvenile-detention center. "If we expanded by 50 percent and did nothing else, we'd be hard-pressed to keep a modicum of order."

Even though Scott County is the third most-populous county in Iowa, after the expansion it will still have the state's smallest juvenile facility, according to the National Juvenile Detention Directory. The next-smallest detention center has 20 beds.

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A \$1.5 million price tag might sound exorbitant for a net gain of five beds, but the amount is deceptive because approximately \$313,000 of the cost will go toward renovation, according to a report by consultant Michael J. McMillen of Champaign, Illinois.

Expanding or building a juvenile-detention facility is expensive, McMillen said: "I understand it's a hard pill to swallow." He estimated that building a 15-bed center from the ground up would cost about \$3 million. He added that he's presently working on a project to build a 30-bed, \$5.5 million facility in Adams County in Illinois. "They are spending that kind of money," he said.

The expanded facility comes in at "about half the cost of a new building," said McMillen, who has worked on the construction or expansion of several dozen juvenile facilities over the past 20 years.

Rhomberg objects to paying about \$300,000 for each bed space – the total project cost divided by the five gained beds. "You could handcuff a cop to these kids 24-7 for eight years at these prices," he said. "It simply cannot cost that much." (See Rhomberg's letter on the following page.)

But county officials prefer to break the cost into parts. They note that dividing the total cost of the addition – excluding the \$313,000 renovation cost – by the 10 new beds equals a price of \$116,400 per bed – about 40 percent of Rhomberg's figure.

Rhomberg also questioned whether the reported square footage of the expansion is accurate, suggesting that the numbers were inflated so the cost per square foot wasn't so high. But the scale map in McMillen's plan accurately reflects the 3,415 square feet the report claims – slightly less than 36 feet by 96 feet. (That figure does not include a 20-percent "grossing" factor – the amount of space needed for walls and other construction and mechanical space.) "Approximate" is the right word," said McMillen, who added that he intended the diagram to show how the expanded facility might be laid out.

As much as Rhomberg complains about the cost of the project, he said he's just as concerned that the Board of Supervisors is operating off of the public's and media's radar screens, unaccountable. If citizens were more aware of the project, they'd be outraged, he said.

There are several problems that feed into each other. The board holds its meetings at 8 a.m., media outlets generally don't cover them, and few spectators show up. In that environment, it's pretty easy for any project – no matter how ill-advised – to get approved with little public discussion. "There is very little coverage of the Board of Supervisors," Rhomberg said. "It's not good government. I think they're not doing their homework." The candidate has certainly seen the Board of Supervisors in action; since he announced his candidacy, he's become a fixture at the board's meetings and kept informed about the issues.

Rhomberg has asked the Board of Supervisors to consider building a new facility, using warehouse space in the Scott County Jail Annex on Tremont Avenue, or working with other counties to build a joint facility. Instead, they've given the green light to this proposal.

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Those involved in the planning process insist that consultant McMillen was thorough and considered alternatives. The consultant said he eliminated the possibility of building a new facility because of its cost.

County Administrator Erickson said McMillen was given two questions to answer: What are the county's juvenile-detention needs, and what's the best way to meet them? "He wasn't told we have to expand," Erickson said. McMillen met and talked with key people who work in the juvenile-justice system.

"What we wind up with is a very conservative, well-thought-out plan by the people who know the problem," Hobart said. "This whole thing is the result of some very, very hard work. I've toured 15 to 20 facilities."

Hobart said the detention center was opened in 1980 as a five-bed facility. In 1986, the county added another bed, and in 1994, the facility was expanded to 10 beds without any additional space. That has led to a space crunch, but the layout of the facility is also problematic. "Security-wise we really have some serious deficiencies," Hobart said.

Visitors, staff, and in-custody juveniles all use the same entrance and must pass by the open control room. Hobart pointed to a panel of lights and switches that a visitor or juvenile could potentially reach. "This control board works every lock in the place," he said.

"It's kind of like it [security] was an afterthought," McMillen said.

The planned renovation would allow for separate entrances for all three groups and would make the control room more secure.

Hobart said violent and nonviolent offenders also can't be separated in the current configuration because all juveniles in detention center share the same common areas, and all the sleeping rooms are grouped together. Furthermore, two of the detention cells are double-occupancy, meaning that sometimes violent and nonviolent juveniles might sleep in the same room. The expansion plans feature two separated sleeping areas and no two-person rooms.

A judge can assign a juvenile to the detention center for several reasons: as a "wake-up call" type of punishment or to protect public safety before a hearing if a child is violent. The average stay in the juvenile-detention center is nine days.

"I view detention as a cog in the whole system," Hobart said. "It's the safety valve."

Kids end up in detention when every other alternative – home detention, day programs, family therapy – has failed.

But "we have more kids than we have beds," said Pat Hendrickson, coordinator of the juvenile-court system.

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The detention facility's average daily population was 8.91 in fiscal year 1998 and 8.28 in 1999. While that might suggest that the number of juveniles in the center has gone down, it's more a function of the volatility. The detention center is still releasing kids because it has to make room for new arrivals.

"We generally release the property offenders," Hendrickson said. "They'll steal your TV, but not mug you. ... We've not had a lot of kids break the law when on house arrest."

Those decisions aren't easy. "We have released kids on house arrest and crossed our fingers," Hendrickson told the Board of Supervisors on August 8.

In an August 15 letter, Juvenile Court Judge John G. Mullen wrote that "just today ... I have had to release two children from detention who really should remain Both of these boys were released because we had to put children into the detention center who were a far more serious risk for violent crime than these two."

Hobart said more beds will not lead the county to put kids in detention just because it has the added capacity. "Scott County has one of the best webs of support for these kids," he said. "We're not going to overuse detention. Scott County wants to use it only sparingly."

That sentiment was echoed by Judge Mullen at the August 8 meeting: "We do not want to lose our community commitment to alternatives." But just because the Board of Supervisors approved the project doesn't guarantee the facility will be expanded at all, or the way McMillen has recommended.

Rhomberg is running for one of the three Board of Supervisors seats that are up for election in November. That means a majority of the five-member board could be new and would have to develop its own opinions on the detention-facility expansion project. When the new supervisors take over in January, the proposal could be nearing the bid stage.

Erickson didn't sound concerned that a new board could, in theory, kill the project. "I really don't know," he said. "That's something that we'll find out next January."

Before a bid could be accepted, the Board of Supervisors would need to hold two public hearings because of the amount of money being spent and because the project would require a budgetary amendment. The county set aside \$650,000 for a juvenile-detention-center project before its scope had been determined, and then transferred \$1.1 million from its reserves to cover the full projected cost.

The Board of Supervisors still doesn't know what the final price will be. "All we've still got are estimates," Erickson said.