

We need a new jail, but we haven't done our homework

A new adult jail for Gallatin County is a big deal. It is a very complex and expensive proposition. Are you ready to let our county officials spend tax dollars on a project of this magnitude? I'm not, and here are a couple of reasons why:

The current construction plans call for tripling the size of our current jail. Operating this new \$18 million adult jail will be a tremendous annual burden on taxpayers. The bond for new jail construction will increase our tax levy by about 12.97 mills. Once the new jail is built, county officials have estimated that we will need to increase the current operating budget from \$1 million to \$2.7 million. To fund the new jail's annual operating cost, the county proposes to increase the public safety mill levy by 13.41 mills. Unfortunately, this may turn out to be a gross underestimation of operating costs.

Recently the Chronicle reported that Cascade County underestimated their jail operating cost and this June will have to ask their voters to pass an annual property tax increase to raise \$1.5 million to resolve their deficit. Assuming an average jail lifespan is about 30 years, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has estimated that the cost of operating a jail generally exceeds original construction costs by a factor of 10. For our proposed new jail, this could mean millions more will be needed annually for the county public safety budget.

The public safety mill levy is now the largest mill levy in the county budget, and the additional 13.41 mills would increase it to 34.19 mills. Fifty-two percent of the county budget will be spent paying off the bond and operating the new jail. Compare that to the county health mill of



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5.53; quite a difference isn't it? Does public safety need that much more of our resources than public health? Are there public and mental health programs that could provide effective alternatives to incarceration? Perhaps a county residential drug and alcohol treatment center would serve us better?

We haven't taken a careful look at the criminal justice process, nor have we analyzed and described how current jail bed space is being used in order to plan for our new jail. Jail planning experts who have visited our community say this vital information would ensure that we build the right jail for our specific community's needs. No one has yet collected information to see if criminal offenders are processed through the system efficiently, nor has anyone collected data to accurately determine what kind of offenders are really filling up the jail beds.

The assessment would provide us with information to determine what type of beds are needed for our unique offender population — adult and juvenile. It may tell us we need more low-security beds for detox and treatment, not expensive maximum security cells. Without this information we could waste tax dollars by building a jail that would fail to meet our needs and expectations. This would be inexcusable because we have the opportunity now to contract with teams of jail experts.

One such team, the Institute

for Law and Public Planning, has proposed a system-wide study for our county that would:

1) Characterize and project the inmate population and system flow to identify the current and future population types and demand on county alternative programs, facility resources, and overall program finances.

2) Analyze the current staffing budget and workload performance of all the county's criminal justice agencies and recommend financing.

3) Evaluate resulting jail, court and related agency management needs in the short- and long-term.

4) Provide the county with an integrated plan that would maximize all resources, people, programs and facilities to allow for an intelligent and feasible approach to planning for revenue to fund a constitutional and effective jail.

We have an urgent need to build a new jail, but we haven't done our homework. With a proposed project of this magnitude, we cannot afford to build a jail that will not be right for our community. It is not too late. The experts can complete the study before construction, and the cost of the assessment will be negligible compared to the information and recommendations that it will provide. Then I will be ready to let the county spend my tax dollars on a new jail.

Lee Copenhagen is currently assisting communities nationally to develop comprehensive strategies to address juvenile crime and delinquency. A former Wyoming deputy sheriff and detention officer, he was appointed to the Detention Center Evaluation Committee and is now a member of the Committee for Cost Effective Public Safety. He can be reached at www.cojustice.org.