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AUGUSTA, Maine — The future of a law aimed at easing prison overcrowding is uncertain after members of the Legislature's Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee were asked recently to repeal or change the legislation it endorsed two years ago.

The law, which consolidated county jails throughout the state, has not reduced costs and kept tax rates down as it promised, prompting calls for its repeal.

Under the law counties pay a capped amount to run their jails and the state pays the rest of the cost, but jail and county officials say the state cannot afford to continue doing so.

LD 1178 would repeal the law and return control of the jails to the counties. LD 1419 would lengthen the budget cycle from one year to two years to match the state budget cycle, and replace two of the four public members on the Board of Corrections with county officials.

The Maine County Commissioners Association and the Maine Sheriffs Association have voted to support LD 1419, sponsored by Rep. Garry Plummer, R-Windham.

Somerset County Administrator Larry Post told the committee LD 1419 would fail to solve several of the law's problems, such as the way county budget are managed; the mixing of jail and prison inmates, which he said causes tensions within a facility; counties paying for medical and dental procedures they would not have to pay for under an unconsolidated system; and lost work time by county employees who must attend regular working group meetings.

Bob Howe, who represents the MCCA, said that because county jails and state prisons serve different purposes, they should be run separately. Howe acknowledged, however, that jails could see gains by being run under the same roof as prisons.

Penobscot County Sheriff Glenn Ross said a coordinated system allows jails to save money by joining together to make bulk purchases and to apply for contracts for medical services.

The legislative committee plans to hold a work session on the bills.