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County leaders shift focus: Overcrowding of jail had been top county issue

By Jeff Starck • Wausau Daily Herald • January 30, 2011

Over the course of the first decade of the 21st century, there was no greater issue in Marathon County than the near-constant debate, argument or discussion about the county jail.

Mort McBain and Brad Karger, the two men who have served as the county's administrator during the past decade, agreed that the jail issue was the county's biggest issue in 2000 and remains so today.

The jail's population soared throughout the decade forcing county leaders to consider building a new jail with a \$40 million start up cost, expanding the current facility or Plan C - something else.

Because of the immense cost associated with the first two options, McBain and Karger steered the county toward the later option. They have overseen the county develop programs that reduce the jail population and provide alternative forms of treatment, punishment and monitoring for inmates.

"It's been a challenge to persuade the community in general that various classes of prisoners are not really dangerous and can be released from jail early or handled under alternative programs," said McBain, who retired in July 2008 after 23 years on the job.

Among the alternative programs the county has developed are:

- The restorative justice program, in which the victim works with the offender to resolve the issue and determine restitution.
- Deferred prosecution -- An offender completes treatment or counseling and prosecutors file a lesser charge or none at all, reducing jail and court time.
- Day reporting -- Offenders charged with drunken driving are tested daily to determine if they have been drinking instead of sitting in jail. McBain said that alternative programming is best to help offenders break their criminal habits and best to save county taxpayers additional expense of a new jail

budget," McBain said. "It sucks money from other budgets and we face eliminating quality of life programs." Karger, who was the deputy administrator under McBain, said the county developed its first strategic plan in 2005, which focuses on educating staff and county board members, improve employee and department efficiency and quality and pursuing economic development and growth. The focus 10 years ago on developing industrial parks and tax breaks for business developers has shifted to improving technology such as broadband Internet access and developing social and entertainment possibilities. A committee of county leaders was formed two years to push plans into reality. "We are trying to see the community through the eyes of a young professional," Karger said.



Some Marathon County Jail inmates do not like the top bunks at the jail, so they put their mattresses on the floor. (Wausau Daily Herald file photo)

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