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County To Be Swimming In Jail Cells Soon

by Scott D. Yost

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The average daily population of the two Guilford County jails climbed in 2010 after several years of decline. Despite that increase, with a new jail coming online, Guilford County will soon have available space for a whopping 1,704 inmates - and that has Guilford County Sherriff BJ Barnes talking about the possibility of moving all the county's inmates to the new jail in 2012, freeing up space in the current jails so the county can make money housing federal prisoners

In 2010, the average daily population of the county's two jails - in downtown Greensboro and downtown High Point - was 873, which meant the 2010 jail population was, on average, 28 inmates a day higher than the 2009 average daily population of 845.

While the inmate population in Guilford County's jail system was 28 inmates higher than in 2009, it was only 10 inmates higher than the average daily jail population five years ago. Before 2010, the county's inmate population hit its all-time high in 2005 when the two county jails combined had an average daily population of 863.

Barnes said he sees at least one obvious culprit behind the jail population increase.

"I think the economy has something to do with it," Barnes said.

Jail and prison populations tend to rise in bad economic times as more people resort to crime to get by.

According to the latest statistics, in 2010, an average of 1,072 prisoners per month were admitted to the Greensboro jail, and 501 a month were put into the jail in High Point.

In addition to the two county jails, Guilford County runs a prison farm near Gibsonville. However, the Guilford County Prison Farm holds convicted criminals rather than prisoners awaiting trial, and the farm therefore isn't treated as part of the county's jail system when it comes to calculating inmate statistics. Also, the Prison Farm doesn't face overcrowding issues to the same extent as the county's two jails.

The Kimme report, a 2005 study of Guilford County's jail system, predicted a rapidly escalating jail population for the county's jails. Yet, in the years following the study, the jail population declined. Based largely on those predictions, the report also said it was a necessity for Guilford County to build a new jail - and a new jail is now being constructed in downtown Greensboro after voters approved a May 2008 jail bond referendum of \$115 million for the project - as well as for renovations to the existing county jail in Greensboro.

After the Kimme report, Guilford County officials took some aggressive measures to address jail overcrowding, which was to be kept in check by moves to speed up the judicial process and by the hiring of a half a dozen new county

Pretrial Services workers.

Judges are more likely to allow someone to wait for trial out of jail if the accused is being managed by a Pretrial Services worker - who stays in contact with the accused, reminds him or her of upcoming court dates and makes clear the consequences of not showing up for scheduled court appearances or committing new offenses while awaiting trial. Pretrial Services workers also have the job of helping identify which inmates in jail are good candidates for awaiting trial out of jail.

In the last five years, Guilford County has also expanded its drug and mental health courts and made use of "rocket dockets" - when the courts set aside a day or two and make a commitment to focus on cases that have been lingering for a long time.

According to Barnes, in 2010, the State of North Carolina was good about taking convicted inmates off the hands of Guilford County. At times in the past, Guilford County's jail overcrowding problem has been exacerbated by a refusal of the state to take inmates due to an overcrowded state prison system.

The State of North Carolina is supposed to take inmates off the county's hands as soon as an inmate has been tried and convicted, but the state hasn't always been prompt about doing so. Barnes once threatened to take convicted inmates down to Raleigh and handcuff them to a fence outside the state capitol building if the state prison system didn't take the inmates off the county's hands.

Barnes sees relief for overcrowding on the way in the form of the 1,032-bed jail expected to open in the summer of 2012. The plan now is to finish the new jail in downtown Greensboro, move inmates from the current Greensboro jail into the new jail when it opens, and then renovate the existing jail to create additional jail space for future years.

Barnes said that, until the county needs the space for its own inmates, it can rent that jail space to federal law enforcement agencies for federal inmates, and the county can make money that will help pay the cost of running the new jail.

"That would be temporary," Barnes said. "As soon as we needed that jail for inmates, we would use it for that purpose."

With the construction of the new jail, Barnes suddenly has so much jail space on his hands that he's even talking about, as a cost-saving measure, moving all of the inmates in High Point and the Prison Farm to the new jail when it opens.

Guilford County Pretrial Services Director Wheaton Casey said she has concerns about her operations if the High Point jail is no longer used to house inmates.

"It would make it more difficult," she said.

She said that, at this point, everything is up in the air.

"I don't know anything right now," Casey said.

She also said she's heard conflicting reports about whether or not Pretrial Services will have a space to work out of the jail, but Barnes said this week that they would.

Casey said she didn't think judges would take too long before filling up all the available jail space in the new jail after it opened. She said that, when a judge is making a decision as to whether an inmate should await trial in jail or out of jail, one consideration that judge takes into account is whether or not there's jail space available. She said unused jail cells tend to fill up quickly.

"That's the nature of jails," Casey said.