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# Greene County seeks solution to jail crowding

6:16 AM, Jul. 6, 2011

At the beginning of this year, Greene County commissioners hoped the jail population would be stable enough that only a small number of inmates would have to be transferred to another county.

The three commissioners budgeted \$4,000 for that possibility.

So far, the county has spent about \$60,000.

Maj. Kevin Spaulding, who oversees operations in the jail as part of his position at the sheriff's office, said the jail has sent inmates out to neighboring counties three or four times this year.

Presiding Commissioner Jim Viebrock said that's at a cost of about \$45 per inmate, per day. He said as many as 60 inmates have been transferred at one time, quickly adding up to \$2,700 per day.

Sheriff Jim Arnott instituted a policy around the beginning of this year authorizing as many as 25 inmates to be sent to nearby jails when the inmate level reached 550. The jail is built to hold 500 inmates and is staffed for 450, Spaulding said.

Viebrock said the county commissioners have asked that Arnott pause that policy for a 90-day period so commissioners can have time to find an alternative solution. For that time frame, Arnott agreed to consider sending inmates to other counties when the local count swells to 575, instead of 550.

According to County Administrator Tim Smith, 570 inmates were kept at the jail July 3. That number dropped to 559 on July 4 but again climbed to 572 by Tuesday morning. Viebrock said that number has gotten as high as 587 recently.

"For whatever reason, the population continues to climb," Viebrock said.

## Safety concerns

County officials acknowledge jail overcrowding has been an issue almost since Day One at the jail, but more recently they have been insisting that it is becoming a serious -- and costly -- problem that will eventually have to be addressed.

The 90-day period to which Arnott agreed will expire by the end of September.

Before then, officials are trying to determine what can be done to ensure the safety of jailers and inmates for as long as possible with funds on hand.

In 2006, six years after the jail was built, the inmate level climbed close to 600. In February of that year, around 30 people from a total of 580 inmates were released after being screened.

Spaulding said that was a viable option back then, but he doubts that many people could be released now.

"Everyone in the jail right now, almost without exception, needs to be in the jail right now, in my opinion," he said.

He added it's not up to the sheriff to decide who is in jail. The court system, specifically a judge, decides who should be detained and who can be let out.

"We're trying to reserve those beds for those who are a danger to themselves or a danger to society," Viebrock said.

Pretrial services does a great job, he said, screening inmates before recommending to judges who should be released from jail.

Everyone involved in trying to get the jail population down fears the possibility of letting someone out who shouldn't be free and something terrible happening, Viebrock said. "That weighs heavily on everyone's minds."

But while citizens are a big concern, Spaulding also has to worry about his staff. Sometimes a single officer supervises as many as 125 inmates.

"Sometimes it keeps you up at night," he said.

The options in the near term however, seem limited. Viebrock said the recent polling done by the county sent the message loud and clear: no new taxes. He said the commissioners recognize that now is not the time to ask. But at some point, somewhere down the line, millions of dollars will be needed for some kind of fix.

"They're between a rock and a hard place, too, just like we are," Spaulding said.

He said he understands the skepticism about any government entity asking for money, but he insists that this is a real problem that could soon become dangerous. "The county tries very hard not to cry wolf," he said.