

# Los Angeles Times

L.A. County jails: Finding a way to fix a broken system

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What a difference a couple of months can make.

In November, Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca asked the Board of Supervisors to consider spending \$1.4 billion to build new jails to help ease overcrowding at Men's Central Jail. The Board of Supervisors balked at the hefty price tag.

On Tuesday, the supervisors will consider Plan B. That proposal calls for spending \$5.7 million to explore other options, including alternatives to incarceration, that could help lower the jail population without building several new jails. Some of the money would also go toward hiring architects to design new jail models.

Clearly, the new proposal is a dramatically scaled-back approach to dealing with a huge problem. The county's overcrowded 23,600-bed jail system has long been the subject of litigation and federal court oversight. The new proposal, however, raises some serious doubts about the county's ability to come up with a good solution. The first and most important question is why a comprehensive study wasn't conducted before Baca and County Chief Executive William T. Fujioka asked the county to shell out \$1.4 billion?

In the past, Baca and Fujioka supported the billion-dollar proposal, arguing it would alleviate some problems by housing inmates in more modern cells that required fewer guards, and ultimately make the jail system safer and cheaper to operate.

But as it turns out, the Sheriff's Department's plan is hardly cost effective. The proposal would have only added about 400 new beds. Currently, there are already some 4,000 available beds across the county jail system. The Sheriff's Department says at least some remain unused because it can't afford to hire additional deputies to guard the inmates that would use them.

No one disputes that Men's Central Jail ought to be shuttered. But the county must do a better job of understanding what should replace it before it asks taxpayers to foot the bill. The last thing Los Angeles County can afford to do is spend billions on a plan that fails to fix a broken system.