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## Time to rethink criminal justice in San Mateo County

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Tuesday, a majority of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors will likely vote to authorize the county sheriff to begin planning for a new jail to house up to 640 inmates and the expansion capacity to incarcerate an additional 192 individuals. The proposed jail, if built as large as is proposed, will be larger than the current Maguire Men's Correctional Facility which will continue to operate after the new jail is open in 2014.

The deplorable condition of the county's women's jail, the overcrowded conditions at the Maguire jail and changes in state law which will require counties to assume responsibility for low level felons that until Oct. 1, would have been housed by the state require the construction of a new jail in San Mateo County. But I cannot support a jail of the size proposed as I believe we cannot afford to build and operate a large new jail without draconian cuts to essential county services. My desire for a smaller jail is predicated on my firm belief that the county can maintain, if not improve, public safety by implementing proven, evidence-based programs to reduce the number of individuals in jail and lower the recidivism rate.

The proposed jail is estimated to cost as much as \$160 million to construct. The county will apply for state funds to defray some of the construction costs but receipt of these funds is uncertain. More importantly, annual operating and financing costs will be approximately \$30 million a year, more if the jail is expanded. These operating costs will remain fixed, and undoubtedly grow, during the life of the jail and will total a billion dollars or more in a generation.

Today, San Mateo County's annual expenditures exceed its revenue by approximately \$50 million. So where do we find another \$30 million for a new jail? Ultimately, cuts will have to be made in vital county programs such as health care and social services. During the most recent budget deliberations, critical programs were on the chopping block but were saved by the Board of Supervisors by dipping into county reserves.

These included behavioral health services for 180 emotionally disturbed children, alcohol and substance abuse treatment for 225 adults, after-school academic centers, foster care services, and veterans' programs. Even Flood Park in Menlo Park was proposed to be closed.

With another \$30 million in annual expenditures for a new jail, maintaining these vital programs and services will be challenging at best. This is particularly challenging as the current budget for the proposed jail includes no new funds for additional prevention or re-entry programs.

No one disputes that we must keep the community safe and that there are plenty of bad people that need to be in jail. But incarcerating people is only one part of the criminal justice system.

At a current cost in San Mateo County of \$62,020 per year to house one male prisoner and \$82,960 per year for one female prisoner, we must look at alternatives to incarceration. Here are five I believe San Mateo County has not maximized.

A report by the Pretrial Justice Institute, a research arm of the Department of Justice, found that on average 73 percent of inmates in the county's jails have not been sentenced and recommends that more of these inmates be released while they are awaiting their day in court if they do not pose a flight risk or a threat to the community. The county should immediately adopt one of the nationally recognized risk assessment tools and appropriately screen its pretrial population

Today only a handful or sentenced inmates are released with electronic monitoring. Many counties are expanding their use of home detention with electronic monitoring for low-level offenders who can then continue to go to work or school.

The county has in place an impressive drug court and mental health court programs that provide alternatives to incarceration for low-level offenders. But they only serve 52 and 103 clients, respectively.

To stem over-incarceration, counties must confront the recidivism problem which, in San Mateo County, is 70 percent. The county has initiated a re-entry program called Achieve 180 and East Palo Alto is looking at a reviving a program it had in place for state parolees returning to their community. Both programs have shown promising results and should be expanded.

Sadly, jails and prisons have become a place where we house individuals afflicted with mental illness. The criminalization of mental illness serves no one. We need to invest in residential treatment alternatives for individuals with mental illness which cost less than jail cells.

In times of budget scarcity, criminal justice policies that rely on building and operating more prisons to address community safety concerns are not sustainable. San Mateo County must take a new course and address the challenge of keeping the community safe by leveraging the best modern practices available and seeking cost-effective alternatives to incarceration.

Dave Pine is a member of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors. He represents District One, which covers western San Mateo, Hillsborough, Burlingame, Millbrae, San Bruno, South San Francisco east of El Camino Real and the unincorporated areas of Burlingame Hills, Highlands/Baywood Park and the San Francisco International Airport.