

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Three-quarters of San Mateo County jail inmates awaiting day in court

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Posted: 07/26/2011 03:00:00 AM PDT

At any one time last year, an average of 73 percent of inmates sitting in San Mateo County's overcrowded jails were waiting for their cases to be heard or resolved, according to a federal research report.

That's considerably more than a nationwide average of 61 percent, notes the report by the Washington, D.C.-based Pretrial Justice Institute, a research group founded in 1976 by the federal Department of Justice.

The report recommends that San Mateo County investigate whether it could release more inmates awaiting their day in court.

But Sheriff Greg Munks denounced the report as "a superficial look" at the county's corrections system. He said the percentage of pretrial inmates is high only because the county has worked to lower the sentenced jail population.

To an extent, the report supports Munks' contention, noting that of the approximately 650 sentenced people who could be sitting in jail on an average day, the county sends about 60 percent back out into the community through such alternative options as work or substance abuse treatment programs.

Michael Jones, a senior project associate with the Pretrial Justice Institute, said the data only provide a starting point for discussion.

"To me, the important thing is, are they using the jail in the most cost-effective way that they can?" Jones said.

The question comes at an important time because on Oct. 1 the state expects county jails to accommodate low-level

offenders who currently end up in California's prisons. The state's budget-related decision has put pressure on San Mateo County to figure out how to handle the influx of inmates and determine how big a planned new jail in Redwood City needs to be.

Three members of the Board of Supervisors -- Rose Jacobs Gibson, Don Horsley and Dave Pine -- have publicly wondered whether the county needs or can afford a 768-bed jail, as recommended by Munks. The correctional facility, to be built on a 4.75-acre site in Redwood City east of Highway 101, is expected to cost \$160 million.

Munks said the research group's report was driven by the desires of some county officials "to figure out a way around building a jail."

In his opinion, Munks added, "that's not going to happen."

Pine said although there is a clear need to replace the county's dilapidated women's jail and deal with overcrowding, the pretrial report raised legitimate concerns.

"When assessing the size of the new jail, we first have to make sure we're only incarcerating people that need to be incarcerated, who pose a real risk to public safety," he said.

In June, San Mateo County's jail facilities held an average total of 997 inmates, or 163 more than the state-assigned maximum capacity, according to information Munks presented to the Board of Supervisors' Criminal Justice Committee.



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In addition, county officials say they anticipate an increase of about 20 inmates each month due to the state budget decision.

San Mateo County already has two programs to reduce its pretrial population, the report acknowledged -- one that releases some misdemeanor offenders with a citation and court date, and another that operates similar to probation.

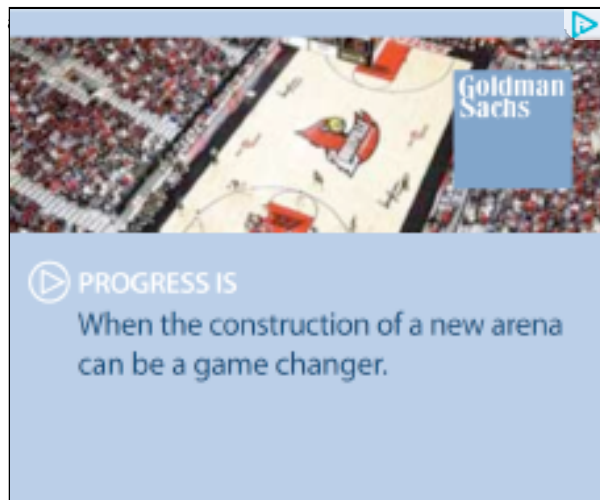
"I don't want to release people who are dangerous," said Horsley, a former county sheriff. "But I'd like to see if we can get our rate closer to the national average."

Munks conceded that the county has "room for improvement" in reducing its pretrial population.

"But that doesn't mean there's a big group of people that shouldn't be in jail," he said.

The report, which was done at no cost to the county, is expected to be discussed by a criminal justice work group of county officials next month, Deputy County Manager Mary McMillan said.

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