



Everything New Orleans

Working group tackles Orleans Parish Prison reforms

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By **Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune**

While the **New Orleans City Council** gave the green light two months ago to construct **a new 1,438-bed jail**, a working group appointed by Mayor **Mitch Landrieu** is trying to determine whether the new jail will be big enough.



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Michael DeMocker, The Times-Picayune

Orleans Parish Prison construction was photographed Sept. 17.

Despite criminal justice reforms, the city's jail population has not yet dropped below 1,438 inmates.

To bring the inmate numbers down further, the working group is examining reforms that would address racial disparities in pretrial jail stays, set bonds more uniformly and help former state prisoners from New Orleans better re-enter mainstream society.

It was a day of discussion: no votes taken, no decisions made.

The Rev. Antoine Barriere; Lucas Diaz, director of the newly created city Office of Neighborhood Engagement; and New Orleans Police Superintendent **Ronal Serpas** asked for a detailed study of racial disparities throughout the city's criminal justice system.

The trio noted that in the city's jail, African-African inmates had an average length-of-stay of 23 days, double that of white inmates booked for the same charges.

Orleans Parish Chief Public Defender Derwyn Bunton and Judge Keva Landrum-Johnson of the Criminal District Court had working group assignments to determine how **Criminal District Court** could implement a bond schedule, which other cities have used to create a more uniform framework for setting bail.

"The schedule is designed to guide, not handcuff the judiciary," Bunton said, describing how a planned pretrial services program would first complete an assessment to determine whether a defendant is a danger to public safety or unlikely to show up for trial.

Criminal District Judge Terry Alarcon swiftly trounced the idea. "It's marginalizing the judiciary," he said.

The final topic, prisoner re-entry, was assigned to Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation President Flozell Daniels and Metropolitan Crime Commission President Rafael Goyeneche.

The Louisiana Department of Corrections would like the jail to run a 90-day pre-release program that would require 225 jail beds to house returning prisoners from the region, including Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes.

Orleans Parish Juvenile Court Chief Judge Ernestine Gray said the re-entry programs used by her court do not require the person return to prison each night. She questioned why jail beds were necessary.

Goyeneche shared a letter written to him by Corrections Secretary James LeBlanc, who wrote that 7,000 state prisoners return to the region every year.

"Currently, when an offender is convicted in one of the (region's) parishes, they are typically sent to a jail in north Louisiana to serve their state time," LeBlanc wrote.

From the audience, Norris Henderson, head of Voice of The Ex-Offender, said that prisoners farmed out to other parishes' local jails do not get the academic help and skills training afforded to prisoners in state-run facilities.

That jinxes the city's chances to help prisoners re-enter, Henderson said. "You've got a guy who's been sitting up in Pine Prairie for six years doing nothing but playing dominoes and spades. What will he learn in 90 days? Let's be real about it."

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