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El Dorado moves to ease jail, other space limits

By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer

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El Dorado County officials moved to address immediate and long-term needs for public safety facilities and called for private enterprise to weigh in with creative ideas.

The Board of Supervisors last week authorized staff members to proceed with the environmental analysis for a jail expansion project off Forni Road.

Laura Gill, county chief administrative officer, said she also will present a proposal during September budget hearings to lease space for the sheriff's administrative and finance staff. This would free up space in the current sheriff's administration building for additional lockers and equipment storage.

The board also agreed to issue a request for proposals to develop a new sheriff's administration center.

Initial plans called for constructing an 80,000-square-foot administration building next to the jail in Placerville, and a substation between El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park.

But staff members said changing financial circumstances led them to recommend building the administration center in the El Dorado Hills-Cameron Park area, where the majority of the county's population is concentrated. The current sheriff's offices in Placerville would be renovated for use as a substation, serving the Placerville, Pollock Pines and south county areas.

Sheriff Jeff Neves said the department is in a space crisis as it prepares to boost staffing for the anticipated opening of the Foothill Oaks Casino on the Shingle Springs Rancheria next year.

"I need it today. I needed it yesterday," he said of the additional office and storage space.

Only three lockers are available for new deputies, and officers have to wait in line to get on a computer to write reports, Neves said.

He acknowledged that the move would further fragment operations.

"This will be the ninth location we operate the sheriff's office out of. None of that enhances coordination and relationships," Neves said.

The space crunch isn't limited to the Sheriff's Department. District Attorney Vern Pierson said increasing demands on the criminal justice system will result in greater pressure to provide new court facilities in the county.

He noted that the District Attorney's Office operates out of three buildings. The county owns two of them and leases the other one.

"This is a bigger problem than just the Sheriff's Department. It's going to affect other agencies," Pierson said.

Ideally, Neves said, the county would construct a criminal justice center to house the courts, Sheriff's Department, District Attorney's and Public Defender's offices and the Probation Department.

Gil proposed issuing a request for proposals for a lease purchase option to construct the sheriff's administration building along the Highway 50 corridor in the El Dorado Hills-Cameron Park area.

But Supervisor Jack Sweeney said he didn't want to limit the location to the west end of the county.

"We might find something somewhere else," he said. "I want to look at proposals. I don't want to take anything off the table."

County Auditor-controller Joe Harn said he would prepare a report on financing alternatives.

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