

Contra Costa Times editorial: Plans for new jail inmates must be carefully evaluated

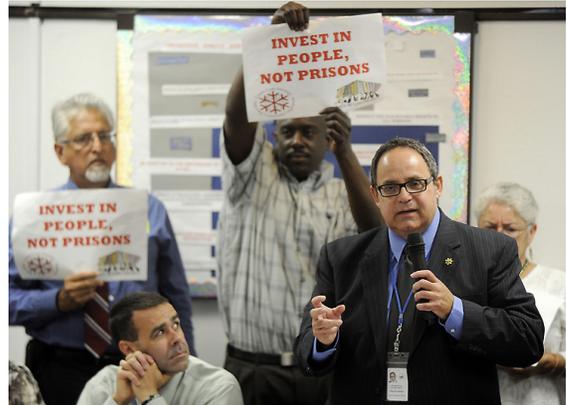
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Immigration attorney Maria Rivera, of San Pablo, questions Contra Costa County Sheriff David Livingston on his statement about the number of immigration detainee holds in the prison system during a meeting at the Probation Department in Martinez, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 9, 2012. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff)



Phil Kader, director of probation for Contra Costa County, addresses the standing room only crowd at the Probation Department in Martinez, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 9, 2012. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff)



Concerned citizens crowd a meeting at the Probation Department in Martinez, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 9, 2012. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff)

Before Contra Costa officials embark on a costly plan to expand the West County jail, they should listen to residents and develop a thoughtful analysis of costs and alternatives.

They should also look at how officials in neighboring Alameda County are developing their plan for an influx of new inmates that previously would have gone to state prisons.

At issue is the redirection of low-level felons, many with drug-abuse problems. The so-called realignment, approved by state lawmakers in 2011, is supposed to save money by moving inmates to local communities and giving counties flexibility to develop innovative rehabilitation programs.

The state also gives counties money to handle the extra work. And it requires that each set up a committee to recommend how to spend it. The committee includes the sheriff, district attorney, public defender, probation chief, presiding judge, health director and a representative of the county's police chiefs. The board of supervisors has final say.

The committee members bring expertise. But many of them run departments that stand to financially benefit from the outcome.

That doesn't seem to be a problem in Alameda County, where committee members are listening to interested members of the community and are starting to carefully analyze how best to spend their \$29 million for the current fiscal year.

But in Contra Costa, Sheriff David Livingston insists on expanding the West County jail by 150 beds. For realignment, the county will receive about \$19 million this fiscal year. Livingston wants to spend \$2.9 million for the expansion. He will also have to staff it with deputies, at \$194,000 each for annual salary and benefits.

Critics include Supervisor John Gioia, three East Bay legislators and Richmond Police Chief Chris Magnus, who sits on the committee. They've asked for numbers to support Livingston's request and an evaluation of alternatives.

They wonder why he would build more capacity while housing what we're told is an average of 80 inmates a day for the federal government, whether the county's current capacity of nearly 2,000 could be better used and whether jail populations could be reduced by greater use of home monitoring and changes that help poor people afford bail while awaiting trial.

Livingston has stonewalled. Rather than provide a comprehensive report and address the concerns of critics and questions of the press, he has essentially told them to pound sand. He has also crudely tried to politicize the process by calling on police chiefs to replace Magnus as their committee representative.

At one point, through a spokesman, he told a reporter he wouldn't answer questions until after the committee voted on his proposal. That's an inappropriate response for any public official, especially when public funds are at stake. Maybe he needs more jail beds, but he hasn't made the case.

Livingston is not the only one at fault here. The entire seven-member committee has failed to carefully evaluate options and develop a comprehensive plan. With so much at stake, the decisions must be supported by thoughtful research and data. So far, we haven't seen that.

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