

Discussion over closing juvenile hall raises stir

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OKANOGAN — Okanogan County commissioners are looking into closing the county's juvenile detention center and sending young offenders to a privately-run facility near Spokane.

Built in 1974, the Okanogan County Corrections Center is a 10-bed facility across the street from the Okanogan County Courthouse. If it closes, eight full-time corrections officers and five or six part-time officers would lose their jobs. The closure would also impact businesses that supply the facility and others that serve juveniles, including the Okanogan School District, which runs its educational program.

Martin Hall is in Medical Lake, almost 140 miles away, and houses juveniles from nine counties, including Douglas. It is operated by Community, Counseling and Correctional Services, Inc., a Butte, Montana, company. Those in the consortium pay \$155 per person, per day for a set number of beds leased for the year.

Okanogan County commissioners say that although previous commissions considered joining the consortium and rejected the idea, a record of their analysis wasn't thorough enough.

Commissioners Ray Campbell and Sheilah Kennedy both said that they are accountable to the taxpayers to analyze the best option for juvenile detention, after being made aware of possible structural and safety problems at the county's facility.

"As commissioners, we are trying to figure out budgets, and to stay within those without raising taxes," Kennedy said, adding, "If repairs haven't been made, we're going to have to find money to possibly do those

repairs, and probably that's going to have to come from the taxpayers."

Campbell added, "We have to do a detailed analysis of this — the cost-benefits, which is the most reasonable cost-wise to our taxpayers — but also provide a good service."

"Our duty is to the taxpayers," he added. "We're not here to create jobs for people in the county. I don't want to see our employees without work, but I think that's not our first obligation."

Richard Johnson, superintendent of the Okanogan School District, said the district works closely with the schools where the juveniles are enrolled to ensure that they work with the same curriculum.

He said he also worries about the distance of Martin Hall, which could prohibit some families from visiting their children.

Dennis Rabidou, the county's juvenile department administrator, said he is most concerned because commissioners have been gathering information without talking to him on to his department.

He said at Martin Hall's current rates, it would cost Okanogan County about \$100,000 more per year to house juveniles there compared with his current budget.

He added that the building is safe and there are no serious deficiencies.

Paul Parmley, representative of Teamsters Local 760 who negotiates contracts for the juvenile department employees, said the discussion puts other county employees in fear of losing their jobs.

"If you eliminated all these positions up there, there aren't replacement jobs," he said. "You will force people to move out of the county."

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