

New jail is expensive; it's also much too small

By JAMIE MARKS

A plush, new \$8.5 million jail will become home to Santa Cruz County's inmates come mid-April, but the ultra-modern facility is not without its problems.

For example: The jail is about 70 beds too small — a problem that troubles nearly everyone in the criminal justice system, from inmates to probation officers.

—The cost overrun of the new facility is about \$2.2 million, due in large part to inflation and delays in beginning construction;

—The architect designed locks in the maximum-security area for janitors' rooms that can be easily opened from the outside but which lock automatically from the inside — a problem that could result in some unwitting person being locked inside the room for hours on end. They've been changed. And other "bugs" exist.

But for the most part, the new facility on Water Street, across from the County Government Center, is everything implied in its descriptive title — a "new generation jail."

Each inmate will have his or her own room with a choice of two radio stations to listen to. Doors on most cells will remain open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., allowing inmates access to a "commons" area they'll share among 14 people and access to an outdoor, basketball court. There are an ultra-modern kitchen to serve up three hot meals a day; a full-time "hospital" with four fully equipped rooms; 23 TV monitors and a videotape machine that can film special bookings, and even a wood-paneled courtroom to handle in-custody arraignments.

Perhaps the most unique feature is that this jail has no bars. Gone are the days of inmates clanging their cups against metal bars as

protest to their keepers.

Now, there's actually privacy afforded to an inmate at the end of a night when the doors electronically shut him in his cell. The doors are all-metal, with one 18-by-6-inch plate-glass window, ensuring that whatever goes on behind bars will not be seen by other inmates.

Sheriff Al Noren is not entirely pleased with the new facility. He says it's "too spread out and takes more people to run it," and he's right on both counts.

The 44,000-square foot new jail is twice as large as the Front Street facility, and takes 91 people (clerks, typists and detention officers) to run.

That is in stark contrast to the Front Street jail, where up until 1962 only two people were employed. Even as recently as seven years ago, the old jail had only one graveyard officer — and that was Lt. Jim Bonar, who recalls how dismal it was.

Times have changed, and now the jail regularly houses people suspected of violent crimes who are awaiting trial, as well as first-time offenders convicted of "serious" misdemeanors.

As it turns out, many of the county's inmates may never see the inside of the new jail.

Plans call for keeping the Front Street facility's second-floor (called the tank) open to accommodate the rising number of people being jailed, despite an aggressive practice of releasing people on their own recognizance (without bail) if they're facing "petty" crimes.

Because of a 1972 federal lawsuit which claimed that conditions at Front Street were "abysmal," the sheriff's office was forced to spend some \$1.3 million fixing up the old facility and ordered to restrict the number of inmates to just

over 100.

Perhaps the lawsuit was a blessing in disguise. Because of the court order, plans began for a new jail — one that would emphasize progressive ideas on inmate care rather than just the warehousing approach.

But the Board of Supervisors and various community groups thought that a "big" jail would lead to more arrests, and so began a seven-year battle over the size of the new building.

In 1979, a 92-bed facility was approved and contracted out to Carl N. Swenson Co. of San Jose. The architects — Kaplan and McLaughlin of San Francisco — were hired because of their experience in designing large facilities (mainly hospitals).

Unfortunately the new facility is still 70 beds short of what is needed on an average day. Some days see 176 people booked into county jail — and most of them are sent off to the jail in San Bruno, described by many as a "nasty place."

Santa Cruz County has a contract with San Bruno allowing 40 inmates a day to be placed up there as overflow. (Women are sent to Monterey County jail). The 40 figure is misleading — on Thursday of this week, 56 Santa Cruz inmates were in San Bruno.

The problems with sending inmates to San Bruno are myriad:

—It costs \$37 per day per inmate to house someone in San Bruno, which costs the county some \$600,000 per year, including transportation;

—Probation officers, defense attorneys and psychiatrists cannot talk to their clients when they're in San Bruno. And sometimes, according to one defense attorney, inmates are brought down to Santa Cruz for one day or less before they are whisked away — often before the attorney

has a chance to talk with the inmate;

—Deputy Chief of the Detention Bureau Al Stevens said the racial problems encountered by Santa Cruz inmates in San Bruno, where many inmates are black, are among many complaints he receives.

Some inmates are assaulted, others come back pleading not to be sent back. Horror stories abound. One attorney recounted how an extremely vulnerable man was sent to San Bruno — a man with serious emotional problems — and came back having been assaulted repeatedly.

It's a place that Al Stevens would like to keep the men he has locked up from being sent to.

The problem with the smallness of the new jail also means difficult times for those who are locked up in this county, Stevens said.

Most state-mandated standards require eight separate housing areas for the kind and number of inmates housed in Santa Cruz. Inmates are segregated according to a number of factors under ideal conditions: They are separated according to sex; sentenced and unsentenced; prison and street gang membership; hardened and "green" inmates; homosexual and heterosexual; and finally those easily exploited and those who are assaultive.

"The new jail is not only too small, it doesn't allow us any flexibility in classification," Stevens said.

Of course, many inmates are sent to the Rehabilitation Center on Buena Vista Drive. But those people are already-sentenced inmates who can be held on the "honor farm" without serious problems developing. Not all inmates fit into that category, Stevens said, adding that the majority of inmates to

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Individual cell doors open into a central commons area.

Jail too small

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be kept at the Front Street facility will have been sentenced.

"We'll select others, depending on classification," he added, "people who are being held on parole violations from other counties and those who don't have court appearances for a long time."

Keeping open the Front Street second floor will cost some \$200,000 per year, which has given rise to another plan — and that is to build a new wing to the new jail.

The Board of Supervisors has already given the go-ahead for \$3 million for another 92 beds, to be built next to the new facility.

It's unsure whether that will actually get built. Given the makeup of the current Board, it might not get the approval it needs, Stevens said.

The problem with a rising prison population is not because of more arrests, Stevens said. He readily admitted that "petty crimes," such as Mall arrests for smoking marijuana, do not result in people being housed at the jail.

"We're not here to deal with society's problems," he said. "Basically the only thing a jail can do is keep the criminal off the street, and we're limited to keeping the violent ones. The others — about 85 percent of the people arrested — get released immediately."

Part of Stevens' philosophy regarding jails is evident in the kind of facility he plans on operating. Every new detention officer is being hired specifically for that job in hopes of cutting down on disgruntled deputies from the sheriff's office getting "pushed" into the position; each officer is receiving eight weeks of training and is required to communicate well; the training is topped off by an 80-hour course.

Even detention officers at the old facility are being trained on how to best operate in the new jail.

And on top of that, a team of six officers is writing up new procedures for handling all kinds of problems that might arise — things such as how an inmate should file a grievance, who should get medical care, designing new clothing (going to burgundy-colored jumpsuits and sandals rather than the orange jumpsuits and sneakers now used), jail disciplinary procedures and weapon control.

Stevens' idea is to conform to every state, county and federal requirement that exists — from the American Medical Association to American Correctional Association.

The new jail features some of his ideas as well as things offered by the community.

No weapons will be allowed in the jail — at each of three entrances, the guns will be locked into a holding locker; no movable furniture will be in the various holding cells (a padded platform is all someone arrested on a drunk driving charge will

get); a commissary where inmates can buy cigarettes (not from a machine) and other items will be open two days a week.

"We're trying to make this a progressive facility where the staff and the inmates can cooperate," Stevens said. "It'll make the situation easier for all of us."

That view shows through in the color scheme (tan, bright and dark orange, with green trim) as well as comfortable rooms for lawyer/client discussions, psychiatric talks, and even a lineup room that simulates a bar setting (for better witness identification of a suspect). This latter room will also be available for family visits.

All in all, the new jail is something like a boys' camp, one woman said during a tour. Indeed it is. If nothing else, the various holding rooms and ultra-modern control center (something reminiscent of a scene from "Star Wars" with many-colored panel controls, TV monitors and so on) are the few reminders that this new facility is a jail, not a school dorm.

Parks, rec funding examined

State Parks and Recreation Department funding will be discussed Wednesday at the 7 p.m. meeting of the Adobe Coalition, a task force to support the restoration of the Neary-Rodriguez Adobe in Santa Cruz.

The need for letters to State Senator Henry Mello will also be discussed. The letters of support are needed to urge the legislature to appropriate funds this year for the restoration of the Neary-Rodriguez Adobe.

A report will be given at the meeting on the stabilization program and archeological findings for the historic site.

The coalition fiesta subcommittee will report on plans for the annual fundraising event to benefit the adobe restoration project. The fiesta is scheduled in the fall.

Docent training program offered

A docent training program will take place the weekend of March 28 and 29 in Henry Cowell Park by members of the Santa Cruz Mountains Natural History Association.

For an application, call Chief Ranger Harry Batlin, 335-3858 or docent chairman Jackie Schuette, 1-257-0147. There are no special requirements for the program other than to take an interest in nature and have a desire to work as a volunteer guide in a local state park.

Other training weekends will be held in April and May. Trainees will stay at the park over the weekends and receive instruction from park rangers and other Docents.

'Mame' at SC High