

Prisoners

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Supervisors Vote 5-0 For New Jail

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For the second time in three months, county supervisors have reached a decision to build a new jail at the county center site.

This time around, it looks like the decision will stick.

The board Tuesday circumvented an election on the issue—whether to build new or renovate the old Front Street Jail—by reaching unanimous agreement on the new detention facility.

Faced with two court rulings, along with the threat that a federal court judge may make up the county's mind, and proof that it would cost more to renovate, Chairman Gary Patton gave up his two years' struggle to have the county renovate the old jail.

He became the fifth vote in the 5-0 decision.

The need for a "unanimous vote" was mandated by a State Appellate Court decision that ruled an election must be held if the board remained split on the issue.

Architects estimate that a new facility for 92 prisoners in front of the county courts building, 701 Ocean St., will cost about \$4.6 million.

The two years' delay is estimated to have added at least \$1 million to the project, and along the way an expected \$2 million in state-federal funding for the jail has been delayed or lost to the county.

Patton told the board, "I would like to make clear that in supporting a reaffirmation of the board's previous decision for new construction, which I did not previously support, I am in no way modifying my belief that this county must look elsewhere than to incarceration

for its basic response to the difficult problems of criminal justice which we confront."

Supervisor Dale Dawson said of Patton's compromise, "Your willingness to re-think this is a demonstration of real courage, and I know it is not an easy decision for you to reach."

The long path to the board's decision began in 1972 when a suit was filed in federal court to compel the county to provide safe and humane quarters for its prisoners.

One of the attorneys of that suit was Patton, two years' prior to his election.

The suit is still pending, however, interim rulings by Federal Court Judge Robert Peckham have resulted in the county temporarily renovating the Front Street Jail and busing its excess prisoner population to San

Bruno Jail.

During this summer, a group calling itself Citizens Against A New Jail petitioned and got more than 8,500 certified signatures backing an ordinance in support of renovation of the old jail.

In August, the board, on advice of county counsel that the petitions did not contain a valid initiative proposition, took "no action" to hold an election, and then in September the board decided on a 3-2 vote to build a new jail at the county center site.

Voting against that proposal was Patton and Supervisor Dan Forbus. The latter made it clear that he supported the building of a new jail—as he has done for four years—but that he wanted it placed across Water Street from the county center.

(Continued on Page 2)

Supervisor Vote For A New Jail

(Continued from Page 1)

Along came the final pitfall in November a State Appellate Court ruled the petitions were proper for a ballot issue—even if a court found later that the voters' decision was not binding on the board.

The final escape clause was written into the petitioners' ordinance which stated that if renovation was not feasible, the board could circumvent an election by first agreeing to renovate, and then finding that renovation was not feasible and unanimously agreeing to build a new facility.

Tuesday, the board first accepted the citizens' ordinance and then found that renovation was "not economically feasible."

Patton said he decided on his compromise after the citizens group and his aide attended a number of meetings with architects this past week, and while it was shown that renovation "is far more practical than we were initially led to believe" it also is more costly in implementation and staffing than building a new jail.

County Administrator Ted Durkee pointed out that a special election would cost the county \$65,000, and that by combining it with March school elections it would cost \$22,000. However, the latter condition would require the approval of the county's 12 school districts.

It also was pointed out that about \$53,000 has already been spent in planning and architects' fees, mostly in the implementation of building a new jail.

Whether the board's decision will solve the jail problem is still a matter of opinion.

This month, the county's three Superior Court Judges went on record stating that a facility for a peak load of 92 prisoners "is obsolete before it is built."

Sheriff Al Noren has consistently announced that his jail population is exceeding that number.