

County supes OK outsourcing jail services

Sheriff-coroner also looking to convert Rountree Detention Center into education facility

By JASON HOPPIN

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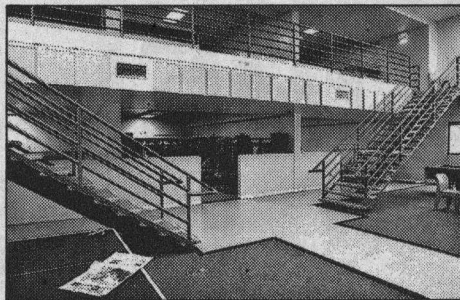
Jail's
SANTA CRUZ — The county Board of Supervisors on Wednesday gave the go-ahead to outsource medical services in county jails, approving the move with a 4-1 vote.

The vote came as the county heard a presentation from Sheriff-Coroner Phil Wowak on his proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year, a document that includes pro-

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Sheriff Phil Wowak wants to turn the Rountree Detention Center outside Watsonville into an education facility.
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found changes in how the county handles inmates due to state reforms handed down last year.

Those changes helped spur Wednesday's vote, which will cost a dozen people their jobs and was taken reluctantly by board members. The new medical provider, Monterey-based California Forensic Medical Group, has offered jobs to all employees.

"It is a challenge that was thrown upon us," Wowak said, taking blame for the demise of a program that he inherited but has struggled with maintaining services and high employee turnover.

"I'm just not a skilled medical care provider, and I don't have the ability to provide that system given the budget constraints that I have."

The move could save as much as \$1.5 million. Though opposed by the Service Employees International Union, the county's largest employee union, the change-over would take place sometime this fall.

It is clearly a program that has taxed the department, with the county handing out hundreds of prescription medications daily. Its on-site medical facilities are lacking, requiring prisoners to be transported to area hospitals for X-rays and other basic services.

In addition to projected savings, the \$3 million contract with California Forensic includes added services such as dental, EKG tests, X-rays and lab work. The company would not be involved with collecting evidence, and inmates could not be used for research.

ROUNTREE EDUCATION

On-site medical services are currently unavailable to inmates at the medium-security Rountree Detention Center in South County, something the county hopes to

change through the contract. Wowak sees that campus, which includes an unused minimum security facility, as key to adapting to new state requirements to accommodate more inmates that normally would have been sent to state prisons.

Wowak said he's already been touch with the county Office of Education about installing an educational program at Rountree, using it to foster inmate rehabilitation.

"Our goal is to remodel that facility and never use it again to house inmates," Wowak said. "It would be to educate inmates and to use it as an educational facility."

During the morning debate on the issue at the County Governmental Center, one county medical worker broke down, crying that she needed the county's medical benefits for a family member. About half of the employees losing their jobs are expected to catch on with California Forensic, and the county is trying to locate other positions for the rest.

"That's the painful piece for me," Wowak said. "A person like that, we're hoping to transition into another county department" to maintain their benefits.

In operation for 30 years, California Forensic Medical Group provides inmate medical services for 25 California counties. Their bid to provide county services came with several recommendations from Monterey County officials.

Several board members said the expansion of medical services to Rountree was essential to the county's efforts to manage more inmates, many of whom are being released under intense monitoring.

"I think it's the right decision," said Supervisor Ellen Pirie, after saying losing the program was tough. "To not have that care (at Rountree) was a huge, glaring hole in our system."

Supervisor Greg Caput voted against the move.

"There's a certain part of me that says there are things we just don't contract out," Caput said.

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