

JAILS SJM 8021-91 LB

Supervisors OK funds for jail near Watsonville

By Lee Quarnstrom
Mercury News Staff Writer

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday narrowly approved funding for a new medium-security jail to be built near Watsonville.

Construction of the new hoosegow, which will go up adjacent to the county's jail farm, is scheduled to get under way in late September. The facility, built mostly with money from state bond issues, should open about a year later, according to the sheriff's office.

Supervisors voted 3-2 to allocate \$3.95 million to the low-bidder on the project, Nibbi Brothers General Contractors, of San Francisco. Supervisors Gary Patton and Fred Keeley said the county could not afford to divert money from other areas to pay for jail staffers.

"I consider this to be one of the most significant items to come before the board in my 18 years on the board," said Patton, who also was a vocal opponent of building the existing county jail across the street from the courthouse in the early 1970s.

**'New sources
of revenue are
not going to be
forthcoming.'**

— Gary Patton,
supervisor

"It is clear . . . that new sources of revenue are not going to be forthcoming," argued Patton, saying that the estimated \$1 million a year to staff the new jail would hurt other county programs.

A 'fundamental' error

Patton said it would be "one of the most serious and fundamental errors" of county government to spend \$1 million a year on jail staffing when that money would have to come from parks, child care and other public programs.

Agreeing with Patton, Keeley pointed to a weekly meeting with constituents he held on Monday.

At that meeting, he said, were San Lorenzo Valley parents of children in Little League who need more playing fields, senior citizens wanting better transportation and people concerned about beefing up programs such as Child Protective Services and others designed to prevent violence to youngsters.

Keeley agreed that there might be a need for a medium-security jail. But he said all county agencies had needs and could expand their services but that with limited funding it was not possible for every county department to do so.

People who belong behind bars

Supervisor Ray Belgard, who worked in law enforcement for 35 years before his election last year to the board of supervisors, supported the expenditure.

Currently, the county has two places to house prisoners. The main jail, designed to hold 224 inmates, had 367 locked up as of Tuesday morning, according to the sheriff's office. The jail farm, designed to hold 162, had 172 inmates Tuesday morning.