

Jails

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

# \$24.6M coming to expand county jail services

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DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Rountree Detention Center's vast bunkhouse now sits empty but Sheriff Phil Wowak wants to transform it into an adult school with job training.

## Rountree Detention Center overhaul wins preliminary approval

By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

LA SELVA BEACH — Santa Cruz County looks to be a shoo-in for a \$24.6 million state grant to overhaul an underutilized minimum security facility at the Rountree Detention Center into a campus to help inmates lead more productive lives on the outside.

The likely award was announced Thursday by the state Board of State and Community Correction, which is overseeing the distribution of \$500 million to

California counties to help with the impacts of prison realignment. The board must approve the awards next month.

"I think it's very good for not only our correction system, but our community as well," Sheriff-Coroner Phil Wowak said.

There are reasons for optimism: Not only did the Santa Cruz proposal top the award list for medium-sized counties, but County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello, a strong supporter of

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the county's application, is a member of the community corrections board.

Put together by Lt. Shea Johnson and Chief Deputy Jeremy Verinsky, the proposal is an extension of the unique approach the county has taken to realignment, which has been a source of controversy across the state.

Rather than building more beds to house inmates, the county has leaned toward a

community-based approach to rehabilitation, steering more people toward home confinement and electronic monitoring rather than use up the county's limited jail space.

Part of that is by necessity — the county's Main Jail is routinely crowded to capacity. But rather than expand the number of beds, the county ultimately wants to reduce them — the 250 unused dormitory-style beds at the Rountree facility known as "The Farm" would be cut to 64.

The planned facility overhaul would include 30,000 square feet of new treatment and educational space. It also

includes a security upgrade, allowing some inmates to shift from Main Jail to Rountree and freeing up space downtown to run programs there.

"We're permanently reducing our total capacity to the system, but we're doing in a way that's thoughtful and meaningful," Verinsky said.

Wowak likens the new proposal — which has been granted preliminary environmental clearance by the county and must be completed within three years — to a school. Detainees will learn skills that are tailored

to their needs, whether it's drug treatment, anger management, job skills or more.

"Our overarching goal ... is that every inmate, every day, will get a certain amount of programming, and that it will meet their individual goal," Wowak said.

Wowak also Johnson and Verinsky deserve the credit for securing the award.

"The county should be proud that we have that kind of teamwork in place," Wowak said.

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