

Research money for jail approved

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Plans for the construction of a new Sullivan County jail took a baby step forward with approval by the commissioners Tuesday to spend \$15,000 to develop new cost reduction strategies for the \$45 million project.



Newport "The purpose of this proposal is to look at the project and see if we can cut costs," County Manager Ed Gil de Rubio said.

During budget meetings for fiscal 2007-2008, the county delegation cut \$15,000 from the budget for drawings and design work that essentially put an end to any hope of building a new jail.

On Aug. 29 the criminal justice coordinating committee met and recommended using \$15,000 from the personnel budget that is not being used.

"The money will come from a line item for a position that will not be filled and the \$15,000 will come from that," Gil de Rubio said.

Ricci Greene Associates of New York, proposed in a report the construction of a new facility at a cost of more than \$45 million. Two other options, which include some sort of renovation to the old facility, would cost almost the same amount.

The current jail was built to house 44 inmates, but routinely houses more than 100 on average, according to the report. The facility is operating over its design capacity, resulting in severe overcrowding.

The report states that the median age for the inmates is 24, and 82 percent of them are in jail for nonviolent offenses. Additionally, 75 percent are medium to high risk substance abusers and 25 percent are on psychotropic medication.

Commissioner Ethel Jarvis opposed using money from one area of the budget to cover expenses in another area and

questioned the legality of such a move.

"There's no appropriation for this," Jarvis said. "It's not in our budget."

County attorney Marc Hathaway was brought to the meeting to explain the law to the commissioners.

"Under certain circumstances you can move money within a department," Hathaway said. "Intradepartmental moves are not illegal as long as the total department budget does not exceed the delegation budget."

In a vote of 2 to 1, the commissioners approved moving the \$15,000 from the personnel portion of the budget to pay for the cost reduction strategies.

Jarvis voted against the move, but qualified her decision.

"It's not that I don't think it's a good thing," Jarvis said. "I just don't want to mess with the budget this year."

If the delegation approves the new jail project, residents will see a potential tax increase of between 80 and 90 cents per \$1,000 of property value.