

Published: January 31, 2008 6:00 a.m.

Housing for ex-prisoners under debate

County weighs sites, cost, buildings for transitional programs

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The Journal Gazette

Some former state prisoners could be temporarily housed in Allen County while officials work out the details of building a new facility for returning offenders.

Community Corrections staff are working with the sheriff's department to possibly use some beds at Allen County Work Release, at Lima and Carroll roads, for convicted felons returning from state prisons to Allen County. How much Community Corrections would pay for the beds hasn't been decided, and a final agreement has yet to be made between the two departments, said Stan Pflueger, Community Corrections spokesman.

County and state officials would like to house 150 to 200 felons in a stand-alone facility so more state prisoners can take advantage of programs and classes through Re-Entry Court. The intensive court-supervised program aims to ease offenders back into the community after their release from prison.

Details about where such a building should go and who would pay for it have yet to be worked out, Pflueger said.

A current proposal calls for building the structure on a parking lot across from the Allen County Jail on the west side of South Calhoun Street. But that location, adjacent to Headwaters Park and downtown, has raised safety concerns and questions that it could negatively affect downtown development.

Officials will continue to debate where to build the transitional housing facility for the returning prisoners, Pflueger said.

In the meantime, Community Corrections Director Sheila Hudson would like to start housing some offenders returning from prison at work release. Offenders would be placed there as beds become available, Pflueger said.

Sheriff Ken Fries said his department is reconsidering a plan to expand work release further into the Byron Health Center adjacent to work release. He said another hallway could be dedicated for Re-Entry Court.

Work release currently has room for 103 people, including women. This week, only 76 beds were occupied, but most weeks about 95 people are housed there, Fries said.

Participants in work release tend to be low-level, non-violent offenders. They are not monitored with electronic bracelets and are allowed to leave in order to keep their jobs, he said.

Re-Entry Court participants would have to meet the eligibility requirements of work release to stay at the Byron Health Center, Pflueger said.

"That's going to limit who we can send out there," he said. "It's better than nothing at this point."

Fries suggested this solution would be needed for a year or two until a permanent building can be found for the program. "I'm interested in going down that path as a temporary solution," Fries said.

Discussions about the fate of the transitional housing facility are expected to continue Friday morning during the county commissioners' weekly meeting and into next week, Commissioner Nelson Peters said.

Officials are slowly getting a better idea of how much it would cost to build such a facility. The county could come up with about half the needed money, but paying for the rest could require a lengthy bond issue, something Peters isn't sure the county can or will want to do, he said.

Construction and bonding could cost up to \$15 million for the building, Peters said.

The size and what departments the building would house and the location could all affect the cost.

The state awarded about \$833,000 to Community Corrections for such a project. An additional \$1.8 million set aside to remodel a possible new headquarters for the sheriff's department could be used toward the project. Selling that same headquarters building could contribute \$350,000 more. Peters said he's unsure whether additional county dollars could be used.

County officials also don't know how much additional money the state Department of Correction will contribute.

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