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Hotel site proposed to house offenders

Early-release program weighs spot on Coliseum

Amanda Iacone | The Journal Gazette

Allen County officials might have finally found a place to house offenders released early from state prisons.

Sheila Hudson, Community Corrections director, would like to house 200 offenders in the vacant Quality Inn at 3330 Coliseum Blvd. W.

To make that happen, the Indiana Department of Correction has supplied \$775,000 for one year. The Allen County commissioners approved an agreement with the state Friday to accept the money.

The state has previously given the county money so it can offer housing to returning offenders, and Hudson has an additional \$650,000 left to add to the mix, she said.

She is planning a \$2.6 million budget to operate the hotel for offenders, including the daily fees that offenders would pay. She does not plan to seek additional funds from the Allen County Council.

The intent behind transitional housing is to ease offenders back into the community while offering support programs, all under the intensive watch of the local courts. Community Corrections already serves returning state prisoners through the county's Re-Entry Court program, but many offenders don't participate because they don't have reliable housing.

State and local officials have discussed providing transitional housing for prisoners in Allen County since 2007. Previously, officials considered constructing a facility across from the Allen County Jail downtown to provide a home for returning offenders.

That idea was panned because of its proximity to Headwaters Park and was seen as deterrent to downtown development. A lack of funding also hampered the project.

Hudson said the hotel site could also house low-level offenders who serve their sentences through Allen County Work Release. Work release houses offenders in a wing of the Byron Health Center at Carroll and Lima roads and allows them to leave detention for work.

Sheriff Ken Fries required work-release participants to have valid driver's licenses after a participant was killed walking to work along Lima Road.

That change has significantly reduced the number of filled beds at the center. The hotel site is closer to public transportation, Commissioner Nelson Peters said.

Commissioner Bill Brown said the site is a great location for such a program.

Hudson said she and Superior Court Judge John Surbeck have worked with local investor Jerry Henry for the past six months to find a suitable location to house offenders. They, along with Department of Correction staff, have visited a dozen sites since



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The former Quality Inn on Coliseum Boulevard West might house Community Corrections offenders.

then.

Henry has proposed buying the hotel and leasing it to the county for no more than \$500,000 a year. But the purchase isn't final and the lease terms could be negotiated, Hudson said.

In a letter to Surbeck, Henry said it would cost \$9 million to buy and renovate the building to meet the Department of Correction's specifications.

That work includes securing windows, adding security checkpoints and cameras, filling in the pool, adding office space and a courtroom. The fully equipped kitchen would be used to prepare meals for the offenders, Hudson said.

The hotel, owned by Orite Hotels of Indiana, closed unexpectedly in 2008 and remains vacant. For the past two years, the hotel was among the top 10 delinquent property-tax payers. In October, the hotel's owners paid its taxes in full, Treasurer Sue Orth said.

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