

New Habersham County Jail Guest Article - 6.13.19

The Habersham County Jail was built in the mid 1990's with the capacity to house 130 detainees. The current daily number of Habersham County inmates ranges between 150 and 239, resulting in the Sheriff's Department housing up to 60 or more inmates in out of County facilities. Housing detainees costs Habersham County additional funds in transportation costs, housing fees, medical costs, etc. There are also potential liabilities and security concerns for the County when transporting inmates to other facilities.

We asked Precision Planning, Inc. to prepare a report that assessed the existing Jail's architectural and engineering systems and provide comments on current conditions, focusing on potential liability issues related to classification of inmates, facility safety, and security. We also asked them to determine whether the current jail could meet ACA and Sheriff's Association standards. According to the study, there are approximately 70 different non-compliance issues with our jail as defined by the American Correctional Association Standards for Adult Correctional Facilities and by the Georgia Standards for Adult Pretrial Detention Facilities. The current jail does not allow for proper classification of inmates, which exacerbates behavioral problems.

A primary goal of the Sheriff's Office is to house its growing inmate population safely, constitutionally, and economically. In addition to the overcrowding problem, a breach of sight/sound separation exists between male and female inmates due to the limited size of the booking area and the proximity of male and female inmate dayrooms. A secondary goal of the Sheriff's Office is to eliminate this breach by providing well-defined sight and sound separation between males and females throughout the facility. A third goal is correcting the lack of administrative, medical cells and holding cells for mentally unstable detainees. This category of need opens the most liability for the County and Sheriff's Office because of its direct relationship to the safety and welfare of inmates and detention staff.

Precision Planning also evaluated the current jail to determine if the facility could be modified and renovated to accommodate the expected growth of the Habersham County inmate population, three scenarios were considered:

1. No jail expansion: Do nothing but maintain the current jail and house out of County when population exceeds current capacity.
2. Expansion and modification of the current facility: Renovation of the current jail to meet projected inmate population growth.
3. New construction: Newly constructed jail on a currently available site to meet projected inmate population growth.

The report concluded that there is no feasible way to expand or renovate the current jail to become compliant with state and federal regulations, leaving no question that we need a new jail. The County has explored every avenue to ensure that we are building the right size jail to meet both current and future demands.

A thorough value engineering discussion resulted in revised concept drawings and cost estimates which reduced the estimated cost for a new facility from \$33.8 million to \$31.6 million. The proposed new jail contains 314 beds which will meet the county's population growth projection for the next 30 years. The support areas in the new jail will included: booking, kitchen facilities, medical treatment, in house court room, and visitation areas which will support a jail expansion up to a 504-beds.

During the March 18, 2019 Habersham County Board of Commissioners' meeting, the Commission voted to include a Bond Referendum on the November ballot for the purpose of building a new jail. This means that the people of Habersham County – not the County Commissioners - will decide if they want Habersham taxpayers to pay additional property tax to cover the debt service on a jail bond.