



City, county discuss expanding court space, sharing facilities

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Cheyenne County may be outgrowing its jail and its courtrooms.

A proposal for a shared building to house city police and the county sheriff's office developed into a discussion about the inadequacies of the county's courtrooms and jail at Monday's county commissioner meeting.

Sidney mayor Wendall Gaston came before the commissioners with the suggestion of a shared facility. The city recently completed a comprehensive study on the police department building, the results of which strongly recommended a new facility at a cost of \$3 to \$4 million.

"There was some comments made about the county also renting out a room," Gaston said. "So I was instructed to ask to see at this time, since we're still in the development stage, if there would be any interest in the county of expanding that building. We're not talking about combining departments or anything like that but expanding the building and having maybe a joint county, city police, sheriff's office with the jail all combined."

City officials wanted to find if there was any interest from the county early in the development of the project.

"All I'm here is to ask for your consideration to think about that," Gaston said.

The city hasn't decided on a location for the police facility, but hopes to have a new headquarters up and running in three years.

Cheyenne County sheriff John Jenson confirmed that he'd discussed this possibility of a shared building with Sidney police chief B.J. Wilkinson.

The needs of the county are fast outgrowing its current courthouse and jail, Jenson said. During the past three major jury trials that took place in Cheyenne County, the county had to hold jury selection off-site, because its courtroom isn't big enough to house the 100 potential jurors sometimes called for major cases.

In June, when the state audit and jail inspection is completed, Jenson has asked for a study of the jail's current needs to determine what changes should be made.

"It is something that I personally believe I think we need to look into and see if it is something that could be done, because we're reaching that time," Jenson said. "When this courthouse was built and jail was built, it was more than adequate. Unfortunately, as Sidney has progressed and Sidney has grown, it's becoming less adequate and I think the problems that face the sheriff's office and the jail is only going to increase. I know this is a huge step and it's going to be a lot of money to even look into."

Cheyenne County attorney Paul Schaub agreed with Jenson and also

informed the commissioners that there were some security concerns with the current courtrooms that can't be easily remedied.

"Those concerns coupled with the fact that the room was inadequate for to conduct jury proceedings and we're a developing community and there's an opportunity available as you've heard from Wendall, I mean all those together, I guess I would just ask that you keep an open mind to the issue," Schaub said.

Commissioner Harold Winkelman wondered how the county would incorporate a facility with a new courtroom into the city's plans.

Justice centers which house multiple law enforcement entities as well as courts, probation offices and sometimes the county attorney's office are becoming more common, Jenson informed the board. Some of these centers only house law enforcement.

If the county were to build a new jail, it would want a facility with a significantly higher capacity and have the ability to hold women. Cheyenne County's female inmates are cur-

rently housed in Garden County.

Other concerns with the current jail include the booking process, which takes place too close to areas open to the public, and how the department must transport prisoners from a vehicle to inside the jail.

“Now, instead of a few million dollars, you’re looking at several million dollars,” Winkelman said. “If you went that route.”

Even finding a site would be a problem, Winkelman commented.

This is why Jenson wants the jail standards program to study the problem and determine the county’s needs.

“It’s something that’s probably coming a little bit sooner than any of us want to look at,” Jenson said.

For the last 10 years the number of inmates at the county jail has increased steadily. Jenson believes it will continue to do so. It’s not uncommon for the jail to have 25 inmates, while the maximum capacity is 20. Tight space is complicated by inmates with mental health issues that must be housed differently as well as groups that don’t get along that must be kept separate from one another.

“Let’s see what our needs are and that way we can start making some educated decisions instead of just assumptions off of the numbers that we have,” Jenson said.