Alameda and Santa Clara counties get state funding for new jails

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SACRAMENTO -- Santa Clara County won $80 million and Alameda County received $54 million in state funds to help build and improve jail facilities at a Thursday meeting that was marked with a protest by activists who want to see money spent on programs that would keep people out of the clink in the first place.

Santa Clara County's share of a $500 million statewide pot is about a third of what it needs to replace the aging and decrepit Main Jail South with a new lockup that will include nearly 150 badly needed additional beds for inmates with mental health conditions. Alameda County will spend its portion on a 38,000-square-foot mental health program and treatment unit.

San Francisco and Ventura were the other large counties that were awarded grants. All told, 15 counties were granted funding out of 32 that applied in what was the third major go-round since 2007 to finance jail facilities.

Contra Costa County failed in its bid for $80 million, and county leaders there said a legal challenge by the city of Richmond on environmental grounds was a key factor in the effort falling through.

Mental health experts say treatment at Bay Area jails is lacking. That concern was underscored in August when a Santa Clara County jail inmate awaiting placement in a mental health program died, allegedly at the hands of his jailers.

While the funds are geared toward improving conditions at facilities throughout the state, protesters at the meeting urged the board to take no action, saying the money should go toward community-based mental health programs and other social services. Emily Harris, field director of Oakland-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, said after the meeting that while jail facilities may be in need of improvements, "the same could be said for shelters, emergency rooms, social services and counselors."

"Are they getting every person out of the jail that could be out of the jail?" she said. "They should do that first, then we'll see what kind of better jail they need."

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After the vote, Richmond Mayor Tom Butt said in a news release that while he is "extremely supportive" of mental health services for inmates, he'd rather see the money spent on preventive measures.

"I believe that if the county has money for these types of programs, it could be spent supporting residents in our community who desperately need help right now, not when they're in jail," Butt said.

David Steinhart of the Board of State and Community Corrections, which approved the funds, said he did not appreciate protesters painting the board as uncaring officials eager to spend money on incarceration instead of prevention. He said the decision on the funding was made at the legislative level, and that's where activists should focus their message.

"I feel our hands are tied," Steinhart said. "We cannot sit here today and shut down the jail or prison system. Our mandate is to do the best we can with these funds."

Kathy Forward, director of the Santa Clara County branch of National Alliance on Mental Illness, said when asked about the board vote that while there's a dire need for more community-based mental health programs, the jail improvements are welcome. "We do need to get reforms and better treatment in the jails," she said. "There are people with mental illnesses who commit serious crimes, and we don't have asylums anymore."

It's a particularly poignant issue in the South Bay after the August in-custody death of Michael Tyree, allegedly at the hands of three jail guards. Tyree, a bipolar 31-year-old, was beaten to death as he awaited a transfer to a psychiatric facility.

"If there had been another facility available for that young man, he would have been there instead of the jail," said Darris Young of the Ella Baker Center, among dozens of advocates who attended the meeting. "He would have been somewhere with people who have understanding and compassion for those with mental conditions."

The new 815-bed facility proposed for Santa Clara County reserves 285 of those bunks for inmates with mental conditions, 105 in single-bed cells for those with acute disorders. But even county officials have acknowledged that number still falls short of what's needed. A May count revealed 449 inmates diagnosed with serious mental illnesses, and inmate advocates believe that count is low.

"People familiar with the facility have told me it's more like 600 or 650 people," said LaDoris Cordell, who is heading the county's special committee to look at improving the jails.
Cordell, a former judge who previously served as San Jose's independent police auditor, said the new jail will be one of the first matters the county committee addresses.

Gary Graves, the county's chief operating officer, said he expects there to be discussion about services and cell space available at the new facility in the next 90 days before the deadline to accept the state funds. He and County Executive Jeff Smith both said there would be talk about dedicating additional space for mental health bunks.

The state money is conditional, and to get it, the county needs to stick reasonably close to the plan it submitted in August, before Tyree's death. The county plans to fund the balance of the project's costs by issuing lease-revenue bonds, in which the county's buildings are put up as collateral. Such bonds were used to finance county health clinics in Gilroy and Mountain View.

Tracie Cone, communications director of the Board of State and Community Corrections, said it is common for counties to submit changes to plans after funds have been approved. She said that as long as the changes aren't major the board will likely accept such revisions.

"You can always make it a better plan," she said.

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