Mayor Butt issues statement on denial of funds for Richmond jail project

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As we reported last week, Contra Costa County lost its bid for an $80 million state grant to build a modern, high-security jail facility at the existing West County Detention Center at 5555 Giant Highway in Richmond.

On Thursday, the California Board of State and Community Corrections officially announced that 15 counties will receive $500 million to construct improved jails via SB-863. Contra Costa County was not among them.

Supporters of the jail project, including officials with the county’s sheriff’s office, say losing the state grant means the overcrowding problems at Martinez Detention Facility will remain unsolved. They also say the money would have paid to build a state-of-the-art facility in Richmond that would emphasize rehabilitative services, such as vocational opportunities or mental health care. County inmates currently lack adequate access to such programs, officials say.

Richmond officials and anti-incarceration activists vehemently opposed the plan, which called for the transfer of more than 400 jail beds from the Martinez facility to Richmond’s. The city filed a lawsuit challenging the county’s environmental analysis for the project. That lawsuit hurt the county’s grant application, along with reports the county was eight days late in filing the project’s environmental impact report to state officials.

The loss of $80 million is crippling for a project estimated to cost $90 million. But that cost did not include funding the annual expenses for staffing and re-entry services.

On Thursday, Richmond Mayor Tom Butt issued a statement on the issue in an attempt to explain why he and other city officials opposed the project:

“We supported the expressed intent of the application, which was to provide expanded mental health, education and re-entry services. However, the Sheriff’s Office failed to provide a plan of how these programs would be funded at a cost of $4 to $5 million annually and a commitment to permanently close down unneeded facilities in Martinez.”

The mayor added:

“Let’s be clear, we’re extremely supportive of meaningful mental health and other services for inmates. Those programs should already be in our jails. More importantly, 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.”

County officials argue that its Martinez facility does not offer enough physical space for programs serving inmates. They also say the West County Detention Center was built years ago for the possibility of expansion and is best suited for a new jail facility of any other county location.

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