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Md. moving forward on detention center projects

Two planned \$100 million facilities in E. Baltimore would hold youths, women

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August 20, 2009

Downtown Baltimore's campus of ancient-looking prison buildings, several of which date to the 1800s, is slated for a major face-lift as the state moves forward with plans for two new detention centers that would cost more than \$100 million each.

A state architectural board is scheduled to review today the design for a five-story, 180-bed detention center for teens facing adult criminal charges. Construction of the glassy, modern building along East Monument Street could begin next summer.

Meanwhile, design of an 800-bed detention center for women began about a month ago.

The buildings would keep adult male detainees separate from women and teens as required by federal law, addressing long-standing Justice Department complaints. Now, men, women and teens share hallway, classroom and booking space, creating conditions that Benjamin Brown, deputy commissioner of the state Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services' pretrial division, calls untenable.

"It definitely is a difficult place to manage today," Brown said.

The state agency has overseen Baltimore pretrial services, including the city jails, since the 1990s.

This week, the state settled a decades-old federal lawsuit over health and safety conditions at the Baltimore City Detention Center, parts of which are 150 years old, though prisoner rights advocates said plans for the new facilities were not a factor in that agreement.

The two projects are expected to cost the state more than \$280 million. State lawmakers have approved money for design but not construction. They're expected to vote on the youth center construction during the next legislative session, which begins in January.

Although Maryland is strapped for cash amid a national economic downturn, lawmakers do not expect to postpone the projects, in part because the state's top bond rating enables it to borrow money cheaply.

Del. Keith E. Haynes, a Baltimore Democrat on the capital budget subcommittee, called the buildings "a good investment" because they would create jobs in construction and lead to the hiring of more state employees.

The detention centers, which would be connected and share some employees, are planned for an area already filled with at least a dozen prison buildings, roughly bounded by Eager Street on the north, Monument Street on the south, Greenmount Avenue on the east and the Jones Falls Expressway on the west.

The projects are the first in an ambitious long-term plan to overhaul the entire complex, replacing aging infrastructure with buildings that adhere to modern correctional theories, such as clear sight lines and separate housing areas for different kinds of inmates, said David Bezanson, an assistant secretary for correctional construction.

Nearly every building but the Central Booking and Intake Center, which opened in 1995, predates the 1950s - some by a century. The castle-like former Maryland Penitentiary with dark granite walls, now known as the Maryland Transition Center, is the oldest operating state prison in the country. Nearby is the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center or "Supermax," home to some of the state's most violent offenders and death row.

Some Baltimore officials, including Councilman Bernard "Jack" Young, say that it would be unfair to add two more jails to an area already saturated with prisons. Young said he has never been briefed on either of the jail construction projects.

"Come on, how much more can one district handle?" Young asked. "The state just drives the trains down the tracks, and it doesn't matter who is in the way."

Councilman William H. Cole IV, who represents the downtown area that abuts the prison complex, said he agrees that Young's district "has taken on more than its fair share."

"In many ways it stumps development opportunities when so many correctional facilities are concentrated in a tight geographic area," Cole said. "It doesn't help the tax base since it's not revenue-generating."

Rick Binetti, a state prisons spokesman, said the location "makes sense" because the state owns the land. And the detainees who would move into the new buildings are already housed in the same area.

Binetti said prison officials have met repeatedly with Baltimore delegates and senators and with Mayor Sheila Dixon's office over the past few years. The prison system's capital projects unit also met twice with residents in the area.

On a recent weekday, 107 teenagers and 447 women were behind bars at the city detention center, which typically houses about 4,000 people awaiting trial or serving short sentences. The designs for the new facilities would accommodate a doubling of those populations.

City prosecutors have said they want to pursue more juveniles on adult charges because, in their view, the Department of Juvenile Services is not strict enough for some of the most violent youths.

Brown, of pretrial services, said increased capacity is only part of why the new buildings are necessary. The "youth wing" of the Baltimore City Detention Center prohibits the staff "from doing even simple things," such as segregating the most dangerous teens from ones who have a minimal record but are facing adult charges.

The teens attend school, as required by federal law, in trailers that they can reach only after walking through the men's lockup, Brown said. The layout poses severe operational hurdles, because all movement of the adult prisoners must be halted as the teens walk through.

"We freeze everything," Brown said.

And there's no space for any other youth programming, such as counseling; neither is there enough space for medical care and rehabilitation programs for women, Brown said.

Last year, the state demolished a housing unit and an old warehouse on the site of the proposed Youth Detention Center. A building called Jail Industries must be taken down for the Women's Detention Center project.

PSA-Dewberry, based in Fairfax, Va., is designing both detention centers.

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