

Inmate work-release possibility growing on Somerset leaders | [View Clip](#)
04/14/2010

*Daily Times - Online, The
Somerset Herald*

PRINCESS ANNE -- Somerset County officials appeared to be warming to the idea of letting state inmates work outside prison walls -- a request that has been denied on numerous occasions for the past 23 years.

County Commissioners have agreed to consider allowing inmates from the minimum-security Annex at Eastern Correctional Institution work on county cleanup or maintenance projects.

"There's all kinds of jobs these inmates can do," said Darryl Webster, who runs the work-release program at Poplar Hill Pre-Release Unit and ECI. "Just make a phone call."

Webster said he has operated the program at Poplar Hill for five years without incident.

Inmates who are released for work crews are supervised by a uniformed officer, and there would be no charge to the county, he said.

Inmates from Poplar Hill have been working in Somerset County on a daily basis for the State Highway Administration for many years, and some have recently been assigned to plant 40,000 trees at Janes Island State Park in Crisfield.

Commissioner Paul Ward said he and others have seen the crews working at the park.

"I haven't heard anything negative," he said.

Others on the SHA crew also painted McCready Memorial Hospital, said H. DeWayne Whittington, who serves on a citizens advisory committee at ECI.

"Before you say no, you may want to see what the possibilities are," Whittington told the commissioners.

Although county officials have always thought there was an agreement that the state would not release inmates for work crews in Somerset County, which dated back to before ECI opened in 1987, no such agreement was ever put in writing, Whittington said.

Any agreement was likely made only with a handshake, Webster said.

It also was before the Annex was built, which houses a low-security population, said Commissioner Rex Simpkins, a former ECI employee.

While Simpkins said he did not favor replacing existing county employees with inmates, he thought there was a lot of work they could do for the county.

"If they're going to be down there lifting weights, they might as well be lifting trash," he said.

Commissioner James Ring, who also serves on the citizens advisory committee, said he has changed his mind about work-release.

"I've always been against letting the inmates out since the beginning, but the more I hear about it, I think we should give them a chance," he said.

Inmates would be available to Crisfield and Princess Anne to pick up trash, cut grass and other jobs, Webster said.

The commissioners agreed to consider the proposal.

somersetald@ dm.gannett.com