

Wheeler wrangles for women at Wapato

Partnership with state could open vacant jail beds to female inmates

By Nick Budnick

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Eyeballing two statewide criminal sentencing measures on the November ballot, Multnomah County officials are hoping that a potential surge in female inmates could help open Wapato jail.

Measure 61, written by former state lawmaker Kevin Mannix, would set mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain drug and property crimes, such as a 36-month minimum for identity theft.

Measure 57, a competing, less expensive alternative referred to the ballot by the Oregon Legislature, also would boost prison sentences on a similar array of crimes – though it would focus penalties on repeat offenders and also provide for drug and alcohol treatment.

Whichever one is approved by voters – and most observers expect one will become law – officials with the state Department of Corrections say it would strain the state’s prison capacity most immediately in the area of housing women.

Enter Multnomah County, which not only has spare jail beds, it has an entire 525-bed jail: Wapato, the \$58 million facility that the county completed in 2004, but for lack of money never has opened.

Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler has made opening Wapato a priority, and he and his staff are hopeful that the county’s biggest albatross could become a boon if made part of a partnership with other jurisdictions, including the state.

“There’s broad agreement that there will be more demand for (prison) beds around the state, for women, in particular,” Wheeler said. “That means our folks have to scramble to figure out how to accommodate more women if we enter into a partnership with the state. And based on what I understand, the state is interested in a partnership.”

No one is suggesting the state would purchase Wapato from Multnomah County. Rather, it would rent beds in one or more county jails, thus providing funds that would help the county open Wapato.

New laws mean new inmates

Scott Taylor, Wheeler's head of the county's Department of Community Justice, has met with state corrections director Max Williams, and says that the state is looking at approximately 400 new female inmates if Measure 57 becomes law, and some 1,400 if Measure 61 succeeds.

Currently, 92 percent of the state's inmates are men. But the number of women sentenced to prison has been growing, and the state's sole women's prison, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, is almost full.

Taylor, whose department includes probation, said crimes covered by the two November measures are ones in which women are disproportionately represented, such as identity theft. "For identity theft, I have more women than men on supervision," Taylor said.

In June, the DCJ oversaw 166 women offenders on probation for identity theft and just 125 men. Of the total offenders in the crime categories covered by the two measures, more than a third are women.

Plan not without snags

In interviews with the Portland Tribune, state corrections director Max Williams and his top deputy, Nathan Allen, said they are interested in discussing the idea with Multnomah County, but stopped short of saying a partnership is likely.

Allen noted several operational limitations to Wapato that might affect the state's ability to use the facility.

For instance, a September 2007 draft report prepared by the state to gauge Wapato's readiness to house state prisoners noted that the facility's good neighbor agreement with surrounding residents would prevent the state from conducting intakes and releases directly from Wapato; also it would cost at least \$2.7 million to modify the jail to meet state requirements, including construction of a sweat lodge area for religious use.

Christine Kirk, chief of staff to Sheriff Robert Skipper, said housing women might make more sense at the county's existing Inverness jail, which already has mental health and medical facilities.

Regardless, however, she sounded a note of caution, saying "Nobody has talked money" in the discussions with the state. "The difficulty is in the numbers – it's always the numbers," she added.

And the housing of female state inmates in county jails likely would be only a temporary solution to Wheeler's goal of opening Wapato. That's because under either sentencing measure the state would move up its plans to build a new women's prison and eventually halt its use of local beds.

“Nothing permanent has been discussed” with the state, Kirk said.

Taylor said that if one of the sentencing measures becomes law, then the state likely will look at several jurisdictions, not just Multnomah County, in search of the best offer.

The result could be a bidding war in which the county could well lose money on its rental beds – unless the state is willing to come up with extra funds to pay a premium on beds.

Peter Ozanne, Wheeler’s deputy chief operating officer for public safety, has been involved in the discussions with the state. He said that if one of the sentencing measures pass, Portland’s central location would be a selling point in renting beds to the state – thus allowing more women inmates to be closer to their families.

Whichever measure passes with the most votes in November is expected to become law.

If Measure 61 is approved, the Criminal Justice Commission has estimated that the state will need to house an additional 4,106 to 6,389 inmates by July 2012, with an additional spending of \$256 million to \$400 million per two-year state budget cycle.

Measure 57 would lead to about 1,600 new inmates and an estimated \$140 million in additional costs per two-year budget, the commission said.

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