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Dutchess has every reason to join jail study

Once again this year, Dutchess County taxpayers are going to pay a steep price to board prisoners in other jails because Dutchess' facility is way over capacity.

This situation has existed for years. And solutions are even further off than before. At bare minimum, Dutchess County officials must actively engage neighboring counties to see if regional solutions are viable. They will soon have such an opportunity.

The Newburgh-based nonprofit group Pattern for Progress and the State University of New York at New Paltz Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach are looking to do such a study. Ulster, Orange and Sullivan counties say they will participate. Dutchess County sheriff's officials say they, too, are open to the idea, but this participation doesn't have to be limited to the sheriff's department - the leaders of the legislative and executive branches should get involved as well when this study gets going in earnest.

The counties recognize Ulster County has opened a \$100 million jail, providing enough space to house some out-of-county prisoners and possibly paving the way to renovate its old facility and use it in some capacity. Ulster County Executive Michael Hein has suggested the old facility could be rehabilitated for a few million dollars and perhaps put to use housing certain prisoners.

Dutchess County is already housing some inmates in the new Ulster County jail, but this is a stop-gap measure that needs a long-term solution. One of Dutchess' best chances to expand its own facility has been lost now that some property next to the jail on North Hamilton Street has been sold by the City of Poughkeepsie to a manufacturing company.

Dutchess County Sheriff Butch Anderson - as well as some members of the Dutchess County Legislature - believed that site was the ideal location to expand the jail, which houses slightly more than 250 prisoners but is typically over capacity by dozens of prisoners each day. Those extra inmates have to be transported to and from other jails throughout the state. The costs are mounting, totaling in the millions of dollars each year.

Citing high construction costs and an inevitable staff expansion, Dutchess County Executive William Steinhaus has long opposed a jail expansion, but he also concedes there is a rising price to boarding prisoners outside the county.

Late last year, he asked the sheriff to urge the state to reinstate a variance that would allow the county jail to house more prisoners - and also to allow double bunking. The state has rejected that idea, saying the county needs a better long-term solution through expansion. For years, the state has been pushing the county to expand the jail far too greatly, by as much as 300 beds. But both the county Legislature and Sheriff Anderson have suggested a more modest approach; the state has indicated it is receptive to hearing any realistic proposal from the county, but there needs to be a consensus.

Postponing necessary action

Steinhaus, elected for a fourth, four-year term in 2007, shows no signs of budging. It's true, in the

short term, the county saves money by ignoring this order, since cost estimates to expand the Dutchess jail have ranged from between \$50 million to \$100 million, depending on the size - and who is doing the estimating. Yet, conditions at the jail aren't getting any better, and eventually the county will have to undertake some type of new construction or renovation or be part of some creative regional plan. Meanwhile, millions of dollars are leaving the county each year and going into neighboring coffers. Surely, if this situation continues, there will come a day when Steinhaus' eventual successor will talk about the albatross he or she has inherited - and how the county should have done something years ago.

The Pattern for Progress-backed study stems from the April 2008 report of the state Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness. Study participants are seeking a state grant to further the work. Steinhaus, too, has cited the commission's report as justification for not building anew. And those responding to the Poughkeepsie Journal's recent economic survey placed government cooperation and consolidation high on their list of suggestions to improve the economy and keep taxes in check.

An in-depth analysis of a regional approach should have been considered before Ulster County built its new facility, but it's not too late to consider viable alternatives going forward. Those discussions should include the state's plans to reduce its prison population and what that might mean for space at correctional facilities throughout the area.

There are no shortages of ideas or approaches that could be taken. But there needs to be a will on the part of government to think differently and then to act. The taxpaying public could use the break. So could future ones who will certainly pay for today's status quo.
