

February 25, 2011 in City

Jail Plan Raises Questions

City officials quiz sheriff on proposal

[John Craig](#) *The Spokesman-Review*

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Spokane city officials have a long list of questions about Spokane County's \$199.5 million proposal to overhaul the county jail system.

Councilman Richard Rush added one more Thursday in a city-county meeting at City Hall: "What's Plan B?"

If city officials still have questions, how can voters be expected to pass a bond measure this summer or fall, Rush asked.

Perhaps voters would be more likely to support a bond measure limited to improving the main jail and adding a proposed 192-bed community center for community corrections programs, Rush suggested.

Holding off on a West Plains replacement for the Geiger Corrections Center would shave \$72.3 million off the cost.

Rush also wondered whether the county jail system would be overcrowded if more corrections programs were in place.

Yes, it would, Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich said. He and jail commander Capt. John McGrath said overcrowding hampers their ability to deliver programs effectively.

"There would be absolutely no reason I'd be here championing a tax increase if I didn't feel it was necessary," said Republican County Commissioner Mark Richard.

Knezovich said a community corrections center near the main jail – and near a variety of needed services – would be much more efficient than providing programs at the Geiger Corrections Center, near Spokane International Airport.

Geiger, a converted World War II Army barracks, is unsafe and exceptionally costly to operate, Knezovich said.

Councilman Jon Snyder worried, though, that the county's ability to operate corrections programs apparently depends on reducing the cost of operating jail buildings.

County officials believe building maintenance and operation costs can be reduced \$2.7 million to \$6.8 million a year. Snyder questioned whether that would be enough in the long run to sustain the planned addition of 45 employees.

Gavin Cooley, the city's chief financial officer, said the proposal could lead to higher capital costs by failing to set aside enough money for building maintenance.

Mayor Mary Verner said she is looking for affordable community corrections programs, and suggested the city could provide out-of-custody programs in partnership with the county.

Knezovich said the county is "100 percent committed" to the community corrections programs city officials want.

"I wouldn't build a facility without those programs," Knezovich said.

Verner directed Cooley to work with the jail project manager, sheriff's Lt. Mike Sparber, to collect more information for another city-county meeting in late April.