



## County Commission Communications

*A Periodic Column Written by Ed Douglas, Presiding Commissioner*

### A VISIT TO THE DAVIESS-DeKALB REGIONAL JAIL

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Several years ago, our county made the decision to contract with Daviess-DeKalb County to house our prisoners. At the time, our jail here in Chillicothe had a major plumbing problem that would have required extensive and expensive repairs including tearing all the floors out to address the problem. In addition to structural issues, we had staffing issues and safety issues to consider; plus, we had a growing prisoner population that exceeded our jail's capacity. In a joint effort with our sheriff and the county commission, a fiscally responsible decision was made, and we have been housing prisoners at the Daviess-DeKalb Jail for the last several years.

Recently, I took a complete tour of the Daviess-DeKalb Jail located in Pattonsburg to see for myself the facilities we use to house our prisoners. Pattonsburg is just north of Cameron, about an hour from Chillicothe. One of the guards walked me through nearly every cell housing the men and women there, along with the kitchen area, medical room, remote television pre-trial hearing room, the room with cameras that monitor all the areas, the outside courtyard, and other areas. The director of the facility, Bob Gray, and his assistant director also spent considerable time discussing the facility and explaining to me the jail's financial statements as well as the operations. Here is a brief overview of what I learned.

The original facility was built by private individuals in 2002 and operated privately for several years. The original cost was \$3.7 million; and it is my guess that this didn't require a lot of the costs that might normally be required in a public facility, like prevailing wage. The facility was profitable, but it is my understanding that the private company lost a contract on some of the prisoners they originally had, so they sold the jail in 2006 to Daviess-DeKalb Counties. The facility holds 202 prisoners and has an annex that can handle another 60. Those two counties passed a sales tax to pay for the jail. The sales tax is \$800,000 plus a year. Not long after the counties paid for the jail, one of their customers, Andrew County, built its own jail. This lowered the prisoner count to approximately 150 prisoners, short of the capacity of 262. Since the facility was paid for, the counties have continued to operate it for both counties and for counties like us and Sullivan County as well as overflow of several other counties. Based on the number that I saw from their financials, the facility has about \$1.7 million of expenses and just about breaks even after receiving the sales tax. Staff expense is nearly \$1 million for the 35 employees. Employees work 12-hour shifts, and the jail has four separate shifts. They also spend \$138,000 for medical and nearly \$200,000 for food.

Our county has a yearly renewable contract with the Daviess-DeKalb Regional Jail in which we agree to pay \$30 per day per prisoner plus some additional smaller items for transportation (picking up prisoners) and medical. Our budgeted amount for 2015 is \$475,000, which is an average of about 40 prisoners a day. It should be noted that our county is reimbursed \$22 per day per prisoner but only for prisoners that are ultimately sent to State prison. Our budget expects a reimbursement from the State plus some reimbursement from individual prisoners of approximately \$160,000 this year which would mean the net cost of prisoners to our county is a little over \$300,000.

This seems like a lot of expense, and it is a huge part of our budget. However, the overall price we pay as a county seems to be very reasonable with what we would have to pay if we built a new jail. First off, a new jail to house 60 prisoners would cost \$6 to \$8 million which would require a new tax and significant debt service. Interest alone would most likely be \$400,000 to \$500,000. Additionally, it would probably require 10 to 15 full time employees at a total cost with salary and benefits of another \$400,000 to \$500,000. Then there would be food and medical costs, as well as insurance and utility expense and other costs that would also be significant.

I have looked at data from other counties and most metropolitan counties in the State of Missouri that have their own jails, and they have a cost per prisoner of \$75 to \$80 per day. I have also reviewed the financials of the largest publicly traded, privately operated national prison company, and their charges to states and others look like they are also in this \$75 to \$80 range. Although a privately held company makes a profit, it looks like their costs per prisoner are close to \$50 per day which is for much larger facilities of 1500 prisoners. Our contract with the Daviess-DeKalb Jail is an annual contract, so it is possible that our rates could increase over time, but it currently appears that overall our current way of handling prisoners is the most cost efficient for our county.

There is one further observation that I would like to make. The overall conditions of the jail seemed to me to be adequate for prisoners. They are fed 2500 calories per day. They do have TVs for group use. However, if you were ever thinking about taking up a life of crime, I think you should visit this jail first. It will make you rethink that plan. Many of the cells have 30 or so prisoners in them with very small beds stacked on top of each other and an open toilet facility. Difficult prisoners are put into smaller cells of four in a very small room or even one per cell in solitary confinement for prisoners that are totally uncooperative. Drab and depressing understates the feeling that you get walking through. I almost wish that students could have their eyes open as to what being a prisoner entails - not a pretty sight.

Finally, our commission has had discussions with our sheriff, prosecutor, and our judges as to what we can do to keep our overall county costs down. It is a difficult subject; and I believe we are all working together well in this area. We will do our best to manage this cost the best we can, but, unfortunately, it is a cost that will not go away.



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