

News

Prison expansion to start in May

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COURTHOUSE — The Montgomery County Commissioners approved a resolution Thursday to begin accepting bids for construction work to ease overcrowding at the county prison.

The county expects to begin accepting bids by April 1 and award contracts by April 15, according to officials. Construction is slated to begin in May, and the additions could be completed in a year's time.

The planned 512-bed minimum security facility would house inmates in the Work Release program and those serving sentences for driving under the influence.

The plan calls for building an administration building adjacent to the Eagleville facility. The inmate quarters, which are modular housing units, would be shipped to the site.

Solicitor Barry Miller said most of the on-site assembly of the modular buildings would be "hook-up work."

This month, Warden Julio Algarin and the Montgomery County Correctional Facility Board of Prisons approved plans and specifications for the proposed expansion. The warden brought the overcrowding issue to the county's attention back in 2004.

Although designed to hold about 1,240 prisoners, the county facility routinely houses more than 1,800 inmates. On Thursday, Algarin said the prison currently had 1,701 inmates.

"If we had not entered into these initiatives, we'd be over 2,000," the warden said.

After Algarin mentioned that all 143 county employees at the prison had perfect work attendance, Commissioner Bruce L. Castor Jr. remarked that the facility is very well run.

"There can't be a department anywhere in government that is as well run as the county prison," Castor said.

The county's work specifications will include both prevailing wage and "responsible contracting" language, Miller said.

Geoffrey Zeh, president and CEO of the Southeast Pennsylvania chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors Inc., once again objected to the responsible contracting provision that he said would favor trade unions bidding for the prison construction work. The ABC group represents mostly non-union "open shop" workers and opposes the restrictive language.

In December, the county resolved its dispute with Lower Providence Sewer Authority and Lower Perkiomen Regional

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Valley Sewer Authority and agreed to pay about \$2 million to them and Lower Providence Township for the planned prison project.

The county, township and the sewer authorities reached an impasse in 2008 regarding sewer hook-up or "tapping" fees for the proposed prison complex, with the county claiming the sewer charges were illegal.

The county filed a civil suit last year against Lower Providence and the authorities, but the December settlement resolved the dispute over sewer capacity.

Currently, The Lower Providence Sewer Authority maintains about 100 miles of pipe and 18 pumping stations within the township and transports an average 3 million gallons of sewage per day to the Oaks treatment plant operated by Lower Perkiomen Valley Sewer Authority.

The Oaks plant also provides wastewater treatment for Collegeville and Trappe boroughs and Perkiomen, Skippack and Upper Providence townships.

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