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Paying for jail expansion is money well spent

Friday, October 13, 2006

The numbers on their own seem shocking — \$11 million to build a new jail in Young County.

The total expected cost announced Tuesday is close to \$1.5 million more than Young County commissioners expected to spend when they agreed to float bonds for \$9.75 million to build the new jail. Some of that can be attributed to increases in construction costs — the reality is that since hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast more than a year ago, construction costs have skyrocketed.

But the total construction costs equaled just more than \$9 million with administration, equipment and contingency making up the rest.

One of the prime reasons for the extra cost is because commissioners agreed to spend more than \$700,000 to build the shell for a future expansion of the facility. When the expansion is completed, the jail will have an additional 44 beds.

Building the new jail is an unpopular decision with many county residents who were opposed to the cost and the corresponding tax increase. With the cost rising to \$11 million, there is probably room for opponents of the jail to question how the money is being spent.

But one thing no one should question is the decision to build the shell. Yes, the extra \$700,000 went a long way toward pushing the project over budget, but as Commission R.L. Spivey said, it may be the best money in the budget.

One reason Young County is rushing to build a jail now is because elected leaders in the past declined to build a new jail, leaving that decision to the current commissioners. The lead story in the Feb. 1, 1998, edition of The Graham Leader says that the state is recommending Young County build a new jail. More than eight years later, the project is finally under way. If the current leaders had declined to build the expansion, it would have repeated mistakes of the past. At some point in the future, Young County will need the extra beds. Waiting until that crisis arose would cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands, if not millions, more. The county will save at least \$350,000 by having the shell built while contractors are already working here, project architect Jeff Heffelfinger said.

Young County is spending between \$40 and \$50 a day to house inmates in other counties because of a lack of space here. That practice will end, and eventually save taxpayer money, when the jail construction is done.

Our only regret with the plan for the shell is that it won't be completed along with the rest of the facility. If the county had the extra 44 beds in place the day the jail opened, it would take little effort to fill them. Counties around the state are looking for places to put prisoners. Every day in Texas, dangerous men and women are let go because there is no place to put them.

If Young County had the extra 44 beds, commissioners could start charging others to house their inmates.

At the average going price of \$45 a day, the county would collect \$59,400 a month, half of which would be profit, Heffelfinger said.

That money would go a long way toward paying off the bonds for the entire project.

County residents have room to debate the total cost of the new jail and will continue to debate whether one should be built at all. But agreeing to build the future expansion is a decision that will benefit county taxpayers today and into the future.



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