



Posted on Sun, Apr. 26, 2009

Jail remodeling will have Johnson County inmates on the move

By JOE LAMBE
The Kansas City Star

Busloads of Johnson County inmates will soon be on the move as a new sales tax pays to turn the jail in Olathe into just a big booking unit.

The 270-bed Olathe jail will close by the end of this year for a \$24 million remodeling that is funded by part of the quarter-cent public safety sales tax that voters approved last year.

Until the job is finished — which is set for the third quarter of 2011 — police throughout the county will have to take prisoners to the 814-bed county jail in Gardner for more than 16 months. Then many Gardner inmates will be transported to and from Olathe for appearances in Johnson County District Court.

The prospect of booking all suspects in Olathe lies ahead, “but to get there they have some potholes,” said Maj. P.E. Livengood, administrator of the Gardner jail.

The Gardner jail project’s second phase, the addition of 554 beds — funded partly by more than \$60 million in sales tax money — is to finish in June and be operating by late fall. By year’s end, officials want to have staff from Olathe moved to Gardner, along with Olathe prisoners and those now farmed out to other Kansas jails.

Two giant new buses the county got this year are part of the plan. People can’t see inside the high and small bus windows, and as many as 36 inmates can only peep out through black steel mesh.

That’s a good thing, say deputies who travel with the inmates. It means no more catcalls to women and other bad behavior that came with the smaller old school buses the county used to use.

There is one problem. When the Olathe jail closes, there is no enclosed garage near the courthouse to park the big bus rigs and no tunnel to take prisoners to court.

“We may have to park the bus and march prisoners through the public,” Livengood said. Officials are considering building a covered canopy that would roll up from a courthouse door to a parked bus.

As for booking, it will be the same in the end, but all done in Olathe. Last year, the jails at Olathe and Gardner each booked about half of the more than 17,639 people who went to jail.

At the Olathe jail now, suspects walk into a small room with a metal detector, surrender property and fill out forms with personal information, including tattoos and scars. Meanwhile, an employee at a computer checks their names against local, national and international police records.

The suspects go into one of three small holding cells and wait, unless they’re high or drunk and belligerent. Then they go in a padded, battered tiny cell called the drunk tank.

If the tank is already occupied — on a busy Saturday night, for instance — suspects may be strapped into a black plastic chair.

Inmates get out of the cells or the chair for fingerprinting and a mug shot and are soon off to a cell. Many people bond out within 72 hours. The average length of stay last year was almost 15 days.

Booking and intake also provide information for police intelligence and for jailhouse statistics.

In the last two years, deputies found that more than 200 inmates were members of criminal gangs.

For the first time in decades, new jail space will not be filled before the facility opens, Livengood said. And for the first time in years, he said, the county will not have to farm prisoners out to other jails.

That means fewer difficulties for staff, he said, and less travel time and stress for family members who want to visit inmates.

Last year, the number of people booked in the county was down by more than 600 from 2007. Crime has declined some, the trend toward harsher punishment has relaxed some, and there are more alternatives to jail.

Not long ago, Livengood said, officials were making plans for a phase three jail addition at Gardner — and the land space is there for it, he said. “Now that’s on hold.”

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