

State seeks bids on new prison

Tribune Capitol Bureau, 5/18/05

State prison officials next month will seek private bids to build a new center for "special-needs" inmates, such as methamphetamine addicts — and Lewistown expects to submit a proposal.

Lewistown officials have been talking for nearly two years about building a meth treatment center, in collaboration with Community Counseling and Correctional Services, a Butte-based nonprofit organization.

Fergus County Commissioner John Jensen said Tuesday those plans are going forward, with talk of a center as large as 120 beds.

But Jensen said it's too early to say what the final proposal will look like or to assume that Lewistown has an inside track.

"When you go out for (bids), you never know what's going to happen," he said. "Our shot is just as good as anybody else's. ... A lot will be determined by what type of specs they put in the (bid)."

Joe Williams, head of the Centralized Services Division for the state Corrections Department, said the department will ask for proposals to house up to 256 inmates.

The focus will be on providing specialized services for meth addicts and/or convicts who are aging, disabled or mentally ill, he said.

"You can bid for a 40- to 60-bed treatment program or you can bid a 150- to 250-bed prison," Williams said. "You can bid two options; you can bid one option."

"We'll look through them and say, 'What gives us the most effective bang for our buck?'"

The actual bid request will be out sometime in June, and a decision may be made by October, Williams said. The state needs more beds because of a prison population growing at 5 percent to 6 percent a year, he added.

Bid requests are being sent to the state's three regional prisons (including Great Falls), local governments, private groups and companies that run correctional programs in Montana and out-of-state companies.

Other communities expressing interest in bids include Great Falls, Helena and Shelby.

Cascade County Sheriff David Castle said his office has talked about expanding the regional prison and jail. But he said he wants to see the bid request first, before commenting on a possible bid.

The same goes for Shelby, where the bidder would be Correctional Corp. of America, which runs a 500-bed private prison south of town.

"When the state puts out the (bid request), CCA will take it back (to headquarters in Tennessee) and decide whether it's something they feel good about bidding," said Toole County Commissioner Allan Underdal.

Ron Alles, administrative officer for Lewis and Clark County, said officials in Helena have talked about building a new jail/regional prison. They also want to look at the bid request before deciding what to do, he said Tuesday.

Mike Thatcher of CCCS, the Butte organization working with Lewistown, said Tuesday the community and his firm are committed to putting forth a bid for some type of meth-treatment center.

The 2005 Legislature also cleared the way for a possible center, passing a bill that says second-time meth offenders can be sentenced to a residential treatment center. Rep. Jim Peterson, R-Butte, whose district includes half of Lewistown, sponsored the bill.

The proposal in Lewistown calls for building a center on land at the Lewistown Municipal Airport west of town. It could cost as much as \$7 million.

Jensen said officials are looking at federal or state money, grants and private loans as possible funding sources.

Thatcher, who is in Nevada and California this week to examine meth-treatment programs there, said the bid might pair with prerelease centers in Great Falls and Helena, which could provide "after-care" treatment for meth addicts coming out of an intensive months-long stay at Lewistown.

"I could see multiple parties having a piece of (the state contract)," he said. "I think you're going to see it splintered or broken up."

Williams of the state Corrections Department said there's plenty of room for innovation, and the agency wants to encourage "a lot of creative responses."