

Hardin jail misses out on contract

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A much-questioned Hardin jail is no longer in the running for a \$2.7 million state correctional contract, a committee decided Monday.

The empty 450-bed lockdown has never opened for business since it was completed late last year and has since defaulted on the revenue bonds sold to finance its construction.

Members of the Department of Corrections committee that evaluated the jail said at a meeting that Two Rivers Authority, the economic development arm of the city of Hardin that built the jail, failed to answer several key questions about the facility, despite being given a second chance to do so.

"Right now, we'd be contracting with a company in default," said Gary Willems, chief of Corrections' Contracts and Facility Management Bureau. "I think that might be a first, for the Department of Corrections, anyway."

The panel concluded that Two Rivers failed to show how it would staff the jail with qualified workers, how it arrived at the per-day costs previously quoted to the state and failed to show that the jail is financially sound.

The panel was particularly concerned that Two Rivers reported it would still be in default, even if it won the contract. The agency said it would need two state contracts to make its revenue bond payments.

The decision means that the Butte-based Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc., or CCCS, will be awarded the contract for the 88-bed facility.

At issue was which entity would run the program, which was begun three years ago as a pilot project for probationers who fail to follow the conditions of their release. Called the Sanction, Treatment, Assessment and Revocation Transition program, or START, the regimen is intended to be in a prisonlike setting where errant probationers can get a sampling of life behind bars while also receiving therapy to help them succeed in society.

CCCS has been running the state's pilot START program for the past three years at a jail-like building in Warm Springs.

The same panel previously met in late September and gave Two Rivers a slim lead in the first step toward awarding the contract. However, the panel members said then that they had many questions about Two Rivers' proposal and asked the group to come back with more information. The panel also asked CCCS to clarify one part of its proposal.

The group met again Monday to evaluate the updated information it had received. It concluded that CCCS had answered all of the questions, while Two Rivers had left many unanswered.

The decision came as the latest development in the Hardin jail's long path to open its doors. The 450-bed jail was built by the city of Hardin, which has no police force or city jail. It was intended to be an economic development tool to provide jobs to the community.

Jail backers have said they were led to believe by the past Corrections director that if they built the jail, the state would place inmates there. However, no contracts were in place before the jail was built, and no written agreements to that effect have ever been produced.

The state has no use for the space, agency officials say.

To fill the jail, Two Rivers and Hardin authorities began looking to other states for inmates but first had to prove to a Helena judge that the facility could legally accept out-of-state inmates.

The judge ruled in Two Rivers' favor earlier this year, but no other states have publicly expressed interest in the jail.

The START contract was the first time Two Rivers had applied for a state contract. Greg Smith, executive director of the Two Rivers Authority, said Monday that the authority learned some things after going through the process, which it applied in its second bid for a state contract to house sex offenders at the site.

Smith on Monday called the process "fair" and said he was pleased with the way the state handled its deliberations.

"As long as it's a fair process," Smith said.