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**Counties: New youth prisons unlikely to be ready by July 2021 deadline**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Officials from Wisconsin counties that were approved for a partnership with the state on new youth prisons say they won’t have their facilities up and running ahead of the July 2021 deadline mandated in state law.

“I consider (the Joint Finance Committee’s action in mid-February) to be a step in the right direction, but it’s just one more step,” Erik Pritzl, the Brown County Human Services executive director, told WisPolitics.com. “Given the scope of this project, I’d don’t think it’s very realistic to meet a July 1 (2021) deadline.”

Dane County Juvenile Court Administrator John Bauman agreed. Even though Dane County has by far the smallest project in terms of both scope and price tag, Bauman told WisPolitics.com there is “no chance” his jurisdiction hits the deadline.

“Our original timeline was if (JFC approved the projects) last October, early 2021 would have been feasible,” he said. “The latest timeline projected out would be somewhere in September or October.”

Lawmakers and former Gov. Scott Walker signed off on a plan in 2018 to close the troubled Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake facility in northern Wisconsin.

The plan aimed to put offenders closer to home. Elements of the plan: $80 million solution to replace the Lincoln County facility; $40 million in bonding to pay between 95 to 100 percent of the construction costs for regional, county-run Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth (SRCCCY) for less serious juvenile offenders; $25 million in bonding for two new state-run “Type 1” facilities to house Serious Juvenile Offenders; and a $15 million in bonding revamp of the state-run Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center in Dane County to help young offenders struggling with their mental health.

But the process had been plagued by delays and cost projections that have come in more than $30 million higher than expected. Those issues forced lawmakers this summer to pass a six-month extension to the original deadline to shut down Lincoln Hills and separately roll the funding for the state-run facilities into county-run SRCCCYs.

Still, the revamped $80 million budget for county-run facilities fell short of the roughly $111 million price tags approved by a panel of Evers administration officials and lawmakers for lockups in Brown, Dane, Milwaukee and Racine counties.

The Joint Finance Committee voted along party lines in mid-February to largely approve proposals from those four counties but chose to cut $8.4 million from a Milwaukee County proposal to lease space that was deemed legally questionable by the Juvenile Justice Grant Committee. Because Act 185 allows the state to take over a SRCCCY facility if it is no longer being used by a county for juvenile corrections, members of the panel didn’t believe a leasing option would comply with the law and required Milwaukee County to submit an additional plan without that component.

The action trims the Milwaukee County project as previously proposed from a maximum of 40 beds to a maximum of 22. Both totals are well short of the amount needed for the 77 youth from that region the Department of Corrections says would be eligible to be housed in a SRCCCY.

Youth from Milwaukee County represent nearly 70 percent of those DOC says would be eligible to be housed in the new SRCCCY facilities.

Quizzed on whether the county would be willing to move forward with such a shortage, Milwaukee County Division of Youth & Family Services Administrator Mark Mertens told WisPolitics.com he doesn’t have “a viable answer to that right now.”

“Our option was essentially cut by more than a third at this point,” he said. “We’re going to have to go back and consider all the options.”

Mertens floated three paths forward: continuing with the plan approved by JFC, which he said was “a little troubling” because he didn’t “want to be in a position not having the resources that we need” to administer new youth justice program; coming up with a different plan entirely to fit within the allotted budget; or going it alone by rejecting the state funding and expanding Project Rise, the county’s current program for non-SJO commitments.

A provision within Act 185 requires counties that accept state money for the new facilities to shutter their so-called “180/365 Programs” — initiatives such as Project Rise that derive their names from the number of days they are authorized to hold young offenders — and replace them with SRCCCY facilities operating under the newly approved “Wisconsin Model” for youth justice.

Mary Jo Meyers, the Milwaukee County Health and Human Services director, reiterated officials in the jurisdiction “really do have to keep all options open right now.”

“We really need to have our facilities team weigh in on what could you do with $15 million, how would that fit with our original proposal?” she said.

Even for the three counties that aren’t being required to go back to the drawing board, the JFC action comes months after counties anticipated the budget panel would sign off on the projects. Timelines in grant proposals from Dane and Racine counties envisioned construction beginning by March and April 2020, respectively.

And counties still face significant bureaucratic hurdles before they can even begin to break ground on the new facilities.

For one, JFC’s action slashed money from Milwaukee County’s plan and brought the total price tag to just over $102 million, but that was not enough to bridge the gap between the $80 million budgeted for SRCCCYs. The proposals now head to the Building Commission, a panel largely made up of lawmakers and chaired by Gov. Tony Evers. The commission will be responsible for making up the roughly $22 million difference.

While the Legislative Fiscal Bureau identified $37 million that isn’t spoken for in state statutes after Evers used his partial-veto authority in the state budget, the timeline for the commission to take up SRCCCY proposals remains unclear.

The commission’s agenda for its meeting later this month is already set, and a Department of Administration spokeswoman indicated it will not be changed to include SRCCCYs at this point. The spokeswoman said the commission won’t meet again until April, but Wisconsin Counties Association officials told WisPolitics.com they will urge Evers to call a meeting sooner.

County officials also expressed concern about the way in which the money will be released. They told WisPolitics.com the difference between receiving a lump-sum payment or being reimbursed after spending their own dollars could significantly change conversations at the county level.

And even if the Building Commission can promptly agree to release funds and DOA administers the dollars, counties face delays within their own government organization. Bauman said he expected it would take at least a month for the proposal to be cleared by Dane County officials while Pritzl said Brown County could take even longer.

“Counties have their own process too,” he said. “Our county board has passed a resolution supporting this in concept, but it’s still a multi-month process to go through (to gain approval).”

Brown, Dane and Racine County officials all said they anticipate construction will be underway a year from now but added that timeline makes hitting the deadline anywhere between “very, very difficult” to “impossible.”

“I don’t understand how any of the counties could make the deadline,” Meyers said. “So, the timeline is worrisome.”

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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