

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF IMPLEMENTING THE REGIONAL JAIL CONCEPT

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The carrot promoting the creation of regional jails in the State of Ohio has been dangling for quite some time now, with very few "takers." The enabling legislation is in place. Section 307.93 of the Ohio Revised Code permits the Boards of County Commissioners of two or more adjacent counties and municipal corporations to enter into an agreement for the joint establishment of a multi-county/municipal corrections center. It makes provisions for both the construction and operation of such a facility.

One of the unique aspects of this legislation is the requirement that the contracting counties and municipal corporations form a "corrections commission" to oversee the administration of the regional jail. The legislation states that members of the commission shall consist of the sheriff, the president of the Board of County Commissioners, and the presiding judge of the Court of

Common Pleas from each participating county, as well as the chief of police, the mayor or city manager, and the presiding judge of the municipal court from each participating municipal corporation. The "commission," in effect, becomes a new governmental entity, insuring equal representation for all participating jurisdictions, regardless of size, in governing the operation of the regional jail.

In terms of economic incentives, House Bill 530 provides up to 60% in matching funds for the construction of a regional jail in the State of Ohio. H.B. 530 provides for the renovation/construction of new jails in Ohio, with top priority being given to the implementation of the regional concept.

In spite of the enabling legislation, widespread political support, and various economic incentives provided by the State, there is only one active regional jail planning committee in the State of Ohio.

A great deal of information has been written on the advantages of the regional jail concept. It is easy to sell the regional jail concept from a "logical" perspective, in terms of its practicality, and its economy of scale and operation through the "pooling" of shared resources. However, the regional jail concept also has to be sold in terms of its "workability": in theory, the regional jail concept sounds great! But how do you make it work? That question has gradually been resolved by the Regional Jail Planning Committee of Northwest Ohio over the past 3¹/₂ years.

In August of 1983, the Toledo/Lucas County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council sponsored an informational meeting to discuss the advantages of the regional concept, and to see if any of the political jurisdictions in Northwest Ohio were interested in jointly constructing and operating a regional jail. Shortly afterwards, a Regional Jail Planning Committee was formed for the purpose of exploring further the feasibility of constructing and operating a regional jail for the interested jurisdictions. The make-up of the committee included sheriffs, jail administrators, county commissioners, judges, prosecutors, and corrections planners from the participating jurisdictions.

As a result of the efforts of the Planning Committee, the Regional Jail of Northwest Ohio is in the process of becoming a reality. The City of Toledo and the counties of Defiance, Fulton, Henry, Lucas, and Williams have drawn up preliminary plans for a 552-bed regional jail facility. They have now optioned land for construction of the facility, and are in the process of finalizing the legal agreement which formally creates the "Corrections Commission of Northwest Ohio." This commission will be responsible for overseeing the operation of the facility.

The primary purpose of this article is to describe the critical elements of the planning process which address the "workability" issue of the regional jail concept and the role those elements play in leading to the actual implementation of the concept.

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First and foremost, the key element necessary for the successful implementation of the regional jail concept is the formation of a cohesive planning group. The selection of the appropriate individuals to serve on the planning committee is a critical first step. In Ohio, the key policymakers necessary to assume overall responsibility for the planning process include the sheriffs, chiefs of police, judges, county commissioners, and mayors and/or city managers from the participating jurisdictions.

The sheriffs and chiefs of police have the knowledge, experience, and expertise concerning the operation and management of the jail. They can provide a great deal of input regarding the design and operational aspects of the regional jail that will be invaluable to the architect selected for the project. It is critical that the management philosophy established by the planning group for the regional jail operation be reflected in the facility design. Law enforcement officials and their jail administrators can and should play a key role in establishing that management philosophy. Their participation can help to resolve or head off any potentially threatening "turf issues" that may arise during the planning of a multijurisdictional facility.

The judges and prosecutors from the participating jurisdictions can provide valuable input regarding the legal aspects of the regional jail operation (e.g., booking a prisoner from one jurisdiction/county into a regional facility located in another jurisdiction/county). Input can also be provided regarding the facility (i.e., types/classifications of prisoners to be sent to the regional jail, procedures for court appearances, and notification of legal status). Input from the judiciary is especially critical regarding the planning of the regional jail operation if pretrial inmates are to be housed at the facility. The planning group may want to consider the possibility of utilizing closed-circuit TV for initial court appearances of pretrial detainees, linking the regional jail to the local courts in the participating jurisdictions.

The county commissioners, council members, mayors, and city managers from the participating jurisdictions are going to be the primary individuals responsible for providing the financing

for the regional jail project. Therefore, it is crucial that they be a part of and have a comprehensive understanding of the planning process in order to be able to justify the cost of both the construction and operation of the facility. Their experience and expertise in dealing with financial matters can be tapped to provide the planning group with some innovative funding alternatives for the regional jail construction and its operation. They can also help in identifying various cost saving measures throughout the planning process. These public officials can be very helpful in creating a public awareness of the current jail problem in each jurisdiction, and helping to build community support for the regional jail project. They can also be very helpful in terms of identifying and obtaining the cooperation of valuable community resources to help implement the programming planned for the regional jail operation.

In Northwest Ohio, the key policymakers have become the voting body of the Regional Jail Planning Committee responsible for reviewing and approving all aspects of the local planning process. Other individuals from the participating jurisdictions, including jail administrators and members of their supervisory staff, local prosecutors, citizens groups representatives, social service agency representatives, and professional corrections planners, have significantly added to the depth of the planning committee in terms of developing a comprehensive planning model.

As previously mentioned, perhaps the most critical element in this type of regional planning effort is the development of a cohesive planning group that is based upon mutual trust and cooperation among its members. The development of that group cohesiveness will not occur overnight. It is something that must be achieved through a lot of hard work and dedication to this type of project. It took the Regional Jail Planning Committee of Northwest Ohio over three years to achieve its goals through a cooperative planning effort. It is essential that members of the planning committee develop a recognition of each other's needs and an understanding of each other's perceptions, maintain an openminded attitude, and engage in mutual support building in order for

the cohesiveness to develop. Once those elements are in place, it will become much easier for the committee members to work cooperatively together in identifying and resolving problems.

Closely related to the development of a cohesive planning group is the necessity to have the planning effort coordinated by fulltime professional staff. The necessary coordination could be accomplished by hiring of a single consultant/project director, or provided by a team of professional fulltime criminal justice planners - depending on the scope and complexity of the planning effort. In the case of the Northwest Ohio Regional Jail Project, the planning committee utilized the planning staff of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to provide fulltime coordination for the project.

Another critical element necessary for the successful implementation of a regional jail project involves the planning of a regional transportation system to serve the regional jail, participating law enforcement agencies, and the courts. The transportation system for the Regional Jail of Northwest Ohio will be operated by the staff of the regional jail. Transportation runs will be coordinated with the participating law enforcement agencies and the courts. Efforts are currently under way to coordinate the days and times of regularly scheduled court appearances for pretrial detainees at the regional jail in order to establish regularly scheduled runs to and from the participating jurisdictions. The Regional Jail of Northwest Ohio will also provide transportation of convicted felons sentenced to state prison facilities. The up-front planning of a centralized transportation system alleviated initial concerns expressed by law enforcement officials from the participating jurisdictions that their road officers might otherwise have spent a great deal of their time transporting prisoners to and from the regional facility. The success of the transportation system planned in conjunction with a regional jail will, however, hinge upon the timely scheduling and coordination of runs along with the establishment of effective communications between the regional jail and criminal justice agencies in the participating jurisdictions.

Another factor that can assist in the successful implementation of the regional jail concept is the development of a standardized record keeping system that can be utilized by all of the participating jurisdictions linked by a computer network with the regional jail. Information such as bookings and releases, changes in legal status, and changes in classification status, along with notification of court dates, can be exchanged between the regional jail and the participating jurisdictions through a computerized inmate record keeping system utilizing standardized forms and procedures.

One final major element that can have a significant impact on the successful implementation of the regional jail concept is the development of a formula for

the proportionate sharing of costs among the participating jurisdictions for the construction and operation of the facility. Each jurisdiction should be expected to pay its proportionate share of the costs based upon the percentage of beds it is projected to utilize at the regional facility. The proportionate share of the costs charged to each jurisdiction can be adjusted at specified time intervals to reflect changes in bed utilization patterns at the regional jail. The sharing of any revenues generated from the contracting cost of unused bed space to nonmember jurisdictions can be proportionately distributed back to the participating jurisdictions based upon each jurisdiction's percentage of unused bed space available during specified time intervals.

The key elements of the regional jail planning process presented in this article represent only a few of the many considerations that need to be taken into account. The planning of a regional jail project must involve a considerable amount of creative thought that can be structured through a comprehensive group planning process. That process will require a significant amount of coordination and input if it is to be successful. The success of the project will be based upon compromise and agreement among the participating jurisdictions. Although it may be considered a tedious process, the benefits of implementing the regional jail concept can well be worth the effort.